

BECOMING CURT LEMAY:
THE FORMATIVE EXPERIENCES OF AN AIR FORCE ICON

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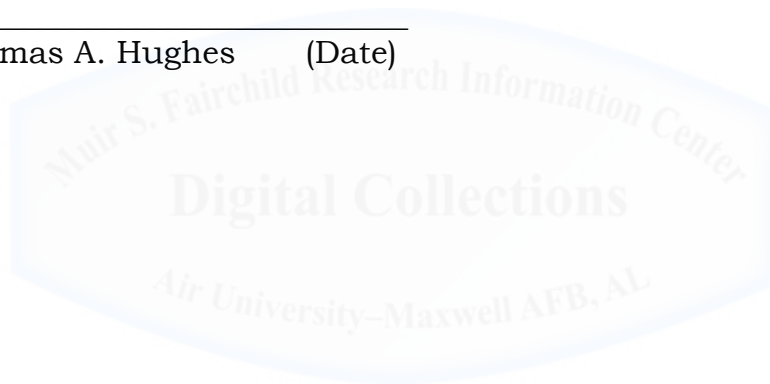
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APPROVAL

The undersigned certify that this thesis meets master's-level standards of research, argumentation, and expression.

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DISCLAIMER

The conclusions and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author. They do not reflect the official position of the US Government, Department of Defense, the United States Air Force, or Air University.



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ABSTRACT

LeMay's remarkable life and military career offer an informative case study that illustrates the role formative events and personal relationships play in shaping one's character and worldview. For LeMay, military advancement and operational successes grew from his uncanny ability to solve complex problems and the positive feedback cycle stemming from his relationships with senior leaders. LeMay successfully navigated a nuanced and competitive selection process to earn a pilot training slot. That experience validated fundamental aspects of his emergent character. As LeMay developed into a military leader, combat experiences and his sponsors' positive influence refined that character and legitimized his belief system. LeMay emerged from World War II as the most successful operational commander of the war. His formative journey was complete; he had "become" Curtis LeMay. During the subsequent 20 years, the formative lessons learned before the end of the war both aided LeMay's successful stewardship of Strategic Air Command and contributed to his struggles as chief of staff of the Air Force.



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Introduction

It is the individual motivation of the ones that get really to the top. In other words, they work harder than everybody else.

- Curtis LeMay

General Curtis E. LeMay is one of the most influential, controversial, and important figures in American military history. During his storied career LeMay commanded in both World War II theaters of operations, helped orchestrate the response to the Berlin Crisis of 1948, built Strategic Air Command (SAC), and served as the chief of staff of the Air Force during the Cuban Missile Crisis. LeMay was only 44 years old when he earned his fourth star in 1951, the youngest officer to attain that rank since Ulysses S. Grant did so during the Civil War. At his retirement in 1965, LeMay became the longest serving four star general in American history, an achievement that still stands today in 2011. The history of the Army Air Corps, the independent Air Force, and airpower in general bears the unique stamp of LeMay's influence. Even today, 20 years after the dissolution of SAC, LeMay's legacy persists in Air Force organization and culture. When considered holistically, only such luminaries as Billy Mitchell, George Marshall, and Chester Nimitz can match LeMay's contribution to the USAF and to the American military establishment writ large. LeMay is among elite company, indeed.

As inconceivable as the list of LeMay's accolades may seem, they are a matter of record, codified in service archives and historical studies. However, one significant question surrounding LeMay's career remains poorly studied. Why Curtis LeMay? Of the hundreds of up and coming officers in the Army Air Corps, including the 23 other general officers

from LeMay's remarkable 1929 pilot class, why did LeMay rise above them all?¹

During an interview after his retirement, LeMay stated that his advancement was due in large part to his own personal motivations to accomplish the task at hand, and that he simply worked harder than everyone else.² LeMay surely worked hard, but other factors mattered as well. His advancement depended also upon the reinforcing dynamic of formative events and personal relationships.

Methodology

LeMay's early life experiences and junior military career shaped his character, which allowed him to flourish under the watchful eye of his mentors. His early military successes bolstered his self-confidence, but also carried an additional, and perhaps more important effect. In many cases, LeMay's success served as a model for both his peers and leaders to follow, resulting in a positive feedback cycle, whereby LeMay gained more and more respect among his peers and superiors for his ideas and hard work. In turn, he parlayed that status to overcome challenges, innovate, and build more success. This cycle persisted from his early days as an aviator, through World War II, and culminated during his command of SAC. Along the way, LeMay's life experiences shaped his cognitive processes, values, and worldview to such an extent that many of his most intriguing decisions later in his career come as little surprise.

Erik Erikson, ground-breaking psychologist and Pulitzer Prize winning author, believed different aspects of an individual's ego qualities emerge during specific periods of the human lifecycle. In his 1953 book *Childhood and Society*, Erikson expanded upon Sigmund Freud's five

¹ 1929 Air Corps Pilot Training Class Reunion Roster, Box 140, Folder 10, Curtis E. LeMay Papers, 1918-1969, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Hereafter cited as "LeMay Papers."

² General Curtis E. LeMay, interview by Dr. Edgar F. Puryear, Jr., 17 November 1976, transcript, K239.0512-1450, US Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, AL, 30.

psychosexual stages and identified eight “ages of man.” During each of these periods, a certain set of personality traits, cognitive biases, and behavior patterns develop. Once present, claimed Erikson, these attributes remained largely permanent. Erickson wrote primarily for psychologists studying psychotic and cognitive irregularities, but his underlying message—that specific groups of traits develop during certain stages of the human lifecycle—is applicable to other social sciences.³ Erikson’s theories encouraged biographers to explore their subjects’ formative experiences as justification for subsequent behavior and emergent character traits.

In his book *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, Robert Jervis identified cognitive factors that cause decision makers to view world events differently. One of Jervis’s conclusions accurately summarized the role of formative experiences. He stated, “events that are seen firsthand, that happen early in the person’s adult life, and that affect him and his country have great impact on his later perceptual predispositions.”⁴ In other words, two people with dissimilar backgrounds and formative experiences might interpret the same event quite differently.

Erickson’s elemental premise justifies this investigation of LeMay’s formative experiences. Jervis’s insights suggest those same formative experiences likely colored LeMay’s decision-making process. The synthesis of these two concepts will inform the quest to answer the question posed above—Why Curtis LeMay?

The importance of formative experiences and relationships in guiding a military leader’s career is not limited to LeMay. On the contrary, this phenomenon shaped the lives of many prominent general officers. The following examples illustrate how biographers use formative

³ Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, 2d ed. (New York: Norton, 1964), 246-74.

⁴ Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), 281.

experiences and relationships as both a character guide and a basis for explanation for the subsequent behavior of their subjects: Carlo D'Este's biography of George S. Patton; William Manchester's biography of Douglas MacArthur; and Stephen Ambrose's biography of Dwight Eisenhower.

In his book *Patton: A Genius for War*, D'Este asserted that Patton's father served as the primary influence on his early life. As a young boy, Patton listened as his family read aloud classic literary works, including "*The March of Xenophon, Alexander the Great*, and anything and everything about Napoleon," as well as numerous Civil War and medieval histories.⁵ D'Este concluded that by the time Patton was a teenager, he believed he was "a reincarnation of soldiers of the past," and "that he had served in bygone armies and fought in the famous battles of history."⁶ D'Este also noted that Patton's father, despite being an alcoholic, prepared him extraordinarily well for life at the Virginia Military Institute. Following his father's advice to be a good scholar and before every drill to "shine his gun and brass until they were spotless" paid off.⁷ Patton became an exemplary soldier and "set a standard for himself that he was to carry the rest of his life."⁸ His formative experiences, as a child and at school, combined with the influence of his father, gave him the required skills and a personal drive to strive for greatness.

D'Este identified an additional type of life experience equally important to Patton's career. Despite being a fine young soldier, Patton received little attention. That all changed following his participation in the pentathlon at the 1912 summer Olympics in Stockholm. After finishing a respectable fifth place, a number of opportunities emerged. In 1913 Patton traveled to France to hone his already formidable

⁵ Carlo D'Este, *Patton: A Genius for War*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1995), 39.

⁶ D'Este, *Patton*, 40.

⁷ D'Este, *Patton*, 64-65.

⁸ D'Este, *Patton*, 65.

swordsmanship under the tutelage of the master instructor at the French Army Cavalry School at Saumur. As a result, he earned the title of master of the sword in the US Army. Additionally, reports of his studies at Saumur made it back to General Leonard Wood, Army chief of staff. Wood took interest in Second Lieutenant Patton and hired him as an aide. In the two years following the Olympics, Patton “gained the attention and respect of the army’s top officials and the secretary of war.”⁹

Though Patton had gained notoriety in non-combat endeavors, he still lacked credibility as an Army officer due to his lack of operational experience. Fate intervened again when, in April 1914, the Army assigned Patton to Fort Bliss, Texas, at about the same time as ongoing border altercations between Mexican revolutionaries and American forces reached a peak. The crisis reached a boiling point on 9 March 1916 when Pancho Villa and his pisteleros raided Columbus, New Mexico, killing 18 Americans.¹⁰ A punitive expedition was likely and Patton desperately wanted combat experience. However, Brigadier General John J. Pershing, leader of the famous expedition to capture Pancho Villa, omitted Patton’s unit from the task force. Upon learning this news, Patton arrived unannounced at Pershing’s quarters, and demanded to be included. Pershing retorted, “Everyone wants to go. Why should I favor you?” “Because I want to go more than anyone else,” replied Patton, who had already packed his bags. Impressed by his preparedness, Pershing acquiesced. Of this incident, D’Este concluded, “Thus began the most important and rewarding professional relationship in Patton’s life.”¹¹

William Manchester’s *American Caesar* explored the life of General Douglas MacArthur, one of the most controversial figures in American military history. Like Patton, formative relationships in MacArthur’s

⁹ D’Este, *Patton*, 142.

¹⁰ D’Este, *Patton*, 157-62.

¹¹ D’Este, *Patton*, 163.

early life shaped his persona and worldview. For example, Manchester described a 13-year-old MacArthur overhearing his father, General Arthur MacArthur, comment, “there is the material of a soldier in that boy.”¹² While the statement itself was not terribly remarkable, its effect on MacArthur certainly was. The young MacArthur swore never to forget his father’s observation, and from that point began preparing himself to be a military soldier.¹³

Though his father was influential, MacArthur’s mother was also deeply and intensely involved in his life—to the point of abnormality—until her death in 1935. Manchester described Pinky MacArthur’s influence during her son’s early childhood development as particularly important. From the time he could talk, she taught young Douglas the “virtue of physical courage and the disgrace of cowardice.”¹⁴ Pinky preached self-confidence from an early age: “Doug, you’ll win if you don’t lose your nerve. You must believe in yourself, my son, or no one else will believe in you.”¹⁵ Manchester argued that MacArthur’s mother possessed an intense inner motivation to see her children surpass the significant accomplishments of their father.¹⁶

Life events also shaped MacArthur. At the age of 18 MacArthur was a long shot to gain admittance to West Point, but after considerable coordination to remove the hurdles to admission—much of which unsurprisingly occurred by his mother’s hand—MacArthur got a chance to compete against 13 other applicants for one admission slot. MacArthur’s mother hired a tutor and he worked harder than he ever had before to prepare. His efforts paid off and earned him a lesson he

¹² William Raymond Manchester, *American Caesar, Douglas MacArthur, 1880-1964*, 1st ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1978), 44.

¹³ Manchester, *American Caesar*, 44.

¹⁴ Manchester, *American Caesar*, 42.

¹⁵ Manchester, *American Caesar*, 42, 47.

¹⁶ Manchester, *American Caesar*, 42.

carried forward for the rest of his life: "Preparedness is the key to success and victory."¹⁷

This was not the last of young MacArthur's important formative experiences. From 1903 to 1904 Second Lieutenant MacArthur served in the Philippines. Even a casual student of history can appreciate MacArthur's comment in his memoir describing that time as "without a doubt the most important factor of preparation in my entire life."¹⁸ MacArthur must have recalled those days as he strode onto the beaches of Leyte on 20 October 1944, setting foot on Philippine soil for the first time since his hasty retreat nearly three years earlier.

Stephen E. Ambrose's study of General Dwight D. Eisenhower also emphasized the important role formative relationships and experiences played in Eisenhower's success as a general. Eisenhower was famous for his good nature and Ambrose believed he was "truly concerned about how other people were getting along."¹⁹ Ambrose attributed such values directly to Eisenhower's mother, highlighting her influence on Eisenhower's childhood temper. After one particularly violent display of anger, Eisenhower's mother quietly explained that his negative emotions were only injuring him and that it was critical that he learn to control his anger. Eisenhower later recalled that conversation as "one of the most valuable moments of my life...to this day I make it a practice to avoid hating anyone."²⁰

When Eisenhower embarked on his military career in 1915, he lacked interest in becoming a "serious student of war."²¹ That changed in 1922, when then Major Eisenhower became executive officer for

¹⁷ Manchester, *American Caesar*, 47.

¹⁸ Manchester, *American Caesar*, 67.

¹⁹ Stephen E. Ambrose, *Ike: Abilene to Berlin; the Life of Dwight D. Eisenhower from His Childhood in Abilene, Kansas, through His Command of the Allied Forces in Europe in World War II*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), xv.

²⁰ Ambrose, *Ike*, 19.

²¹ Ambrose, *Ike*, 42.

General Fox Conner, commander of the 20th Infantry Brigade in Panama. Eisenhower transformed himself into a sponge, soaking in all the knowledge Conner offered. Conner exposed Eisenhower to the classic military strategists and forced him to think critically about military history. According to Ambrose, “under Conner’s direction, Eisenhower found a sense of purpose. For the first time Eisenhower became a serious student of his profession.”²²

Following his tour with General Conner, Eisenhower reported for a temporary assignment at Fort Meade, Maryland. As his temporary duty neared completion, Eisenhower received a cryptic telegram from Conner: “No matter what orders you receive from the War Department make no protest, accept them without question.”²³ A few days later a curious Eisenhower received orders to serve as a recruiting officer in Colorado under the Army’s Adjutant General. Once Eisenhower settled into his new position, Conner enacted his plan. The general used his military connections to convince the Adjutant General to select Eisenhower to attend Army Command and General Staff College in Leavenworth, Kansas—something the chief of infantry had consistently refused to do.²⁴

Not one to squander opportunity, Eisenhower eagerly applied himself to the curriculum. He graduated first in his class of 275. In doing so he gained notoriety and credibility among his peers. More importantly, he commanded the attention of his superiors. Command and General Staff College served as Eisenhower’s coming out party. Shortly after graduation, Conner recommended Eisenhower to work for General (retired) Pershing, former chief of staff of the Army, on the World War I Battle Monument Commission.²⁵ The Army’s top brass was impressed with Eisenhower’s work and rewarded him with a posting to

²² Ambrose, *Ike*, 56.

²³ Stephen E. Ambrose, *Eisenhower*, 2 vols. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 78.

²⁴ Ambrose, *Eisenhower*, 79.

²⁵ Ambrose, *Ike*, 59.

the Army War College. He now held all the prerequisites for future high command.²⁶

These biographies present multiple instances of formative experiences and key relationships. Patton's father shaped him, the 1912 Olympics propelled him to notoriety, and General Pershing subsequently guided his career. MacArthur's mother and father influenced his unique personality and his struggle to gain admission to West Point defined his character. Eisenhower's calm demeanor is directly attributable to his mother's influence, General Connor piqued his motivations, and his staff college performance was a launch pad for later opportunities and successes. As the next four chapters illustrate, similar influences shaped the temperament and career of General LeMay as well.

Overview

Chapter 1 focuses on LeMay's early formative experiences. From childhood, LeMay faced a tough environment that demanded competence above all else. He lacked a consistent role model and became independent at a young age. His experiences in college and the process by which he gained acceptance to Air Corps pilot training further shaped the characteristics that formed the basis of his persona.

Chapter 2 examines LeMay's life as a young Air Corps officer. In the years prior to World War II, LeMay gained an important confidant and mentor. Equally important, he strung together a series of operational successes that gave him confidence and endeared him to Air Corps leaders.

LeMay's experiences in World War II's European theater are the subject of Chapter 3. These dramatic wartime events refined his cognitive disposition. The war saw LeMay rise to powerful positions from which his decisions had far reaching impact. Some of the most important airpower innovations of World War II came directly from

²⁶ Ambrose, *Eisenhower*, 84-85.

LeMay. Further, personal relationships forged in his early career blossomed to new levels of importance over the course of the war.

Chapter 4 analyzes LeMay's duty as commander of B-29 operations in the Pacific theater. As the autonomous leader of the United States' strategic air force in the Pacific, LeMay took bold action to defeat of Japan. His formative experiences culminated during this time period. By the time LeMay returned from the Pacific theater in 1945, he was a military icon, poised and ready to assume a leading role in the United States' national defense.

The final chapter summarizes the role of LeMay's formative life from three distinct perspectives. It begins with an examination of LeMay's remarkable ability to solve complex problems. The second section revisits LeMay's important personal relationships in an attempt to illustrate the role sponsors and mentors played in his formative life. Finally, it focuses on illuminating the rationale underpinning key decisions LeMay made as the commander of SAC. Holistically, these themes illustrate the depth to which formative experiences shaped every aspect of LeMay's remarkable career.

A common theme, which illustrates the dichotomy of LeMay's life and career, winds through the thesis. Clearly, formative experiences shaped LeMay's schema, character, and personality. However, due to his early professional successes and relationships with influential leaders, LeMay also shaped the environment in which he existed. This dynamic represents a positive feedback loop. LeMay's earliest formative experiences, both in childhood and as a junior officer, preconditioned him to a level of military intelligence and insight. Relatively low-level leaders took note of this ability, and granted him authority. An empowered LeMay capitalized by forging new successes; often with such important consequences that those same low-level leaders gained stature along with LeMay. With the confidence of upwardly mobile leaders, LeMay's subsequent innovations carried even broader impact. This

positive feedback cycle, present throughout the entire narrative, is most prominent in the second of the three summary perspectives in the concluding chapter.

Existing Literature

Despite LeMay's iconic stature, the body of work detailing his life is comparatively limited. The most definitive volume is *Mission with LeMay: My Story*, coauthored in 1965 by LeMay and journalist and longtime friend MacKinlay Kantor. Though comprehensive, *Mission with LeMay* suffers from a lack of objectivity, a weakness common to autobiographies. Nonetheless, it provides an excellent window into LeMay's perspective of the issues at hand. Thomas M. Coffey authored *Iron Eagle: The Turbulent Life of General Curtis LeMay* some 20 years after LeMay's autobiographical piece. Laced with an apologetic undertone, *Iron Eagle* is insufficiently critical of LeMay. Further, Coffey generalized many of the complex issues LeMay confronted, and avoids all but cursory analysis of LeMay's early life. These two faults undermine the book's academic value. In 2007, noted military historian Barrett Tillman published *LeMay*, an addition to a series of books titled "Great Generals." This work, constrained by the intent and restrictions of its encompassing series, is little more than a well written primer on LeMay's life. Warren Kozak wrote *LeMay: The Life and Wars of General Curtis LeMay* in 2009. While Kozak presented a very readable narrative, it is largely a restatement of previous authors' work and LeMay's memoirs. Accordingly, it shares their shortcomings. The most recent offering to the collection is L. Douglas Keeney's *15 Minutes: General Curtis LeMay and the Countdown to Nuclear Annihilation*. Keeney's work focused on the co-evolution of LeMay and SAC, but understandably gives scant attention to LeMay's early life and career.

This thesis adds to the body of literature on LeMay through rigorous analysis of key formative experiences and personal

relationships. It examines the circumstances surrounding his childhood and youth, as well as his military career up to and including World War II. It then analyzes major decisions LeMay made during World War II and as SAC commander, illuminating the manifestations of his formative life. While Kantor, Coffey, Tillman, Kozak, and Keeney admirably described LeMay's persona and catalogued his major decisions, the objective here is to analyze the experiences and relationships that shaped LeMay's persona, then scrutinize the effect of those formative experiences on his decision making process.

Primary Sources of Evidence

Two data repositories provide the bulk of the evidence in support of these goals. First, the arguments herein rely heavily on original source documents housed at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. These include the personal papers of both LeMay and Kantor. The value of LeMay's collection is obvious and Kantor's papers are important because they include research on LeMay conducted over the course of 30 years. Kantor was more than just the coauthor of *Mission with LeMay*, first meeting LeMay when he was a correspondent in the European theater during World War II. Throughout and following the war, Kantor published periodical articles on LeMay and later served as LeMay's speechwriter during the latter's unsuccessful 1968 Vice-Presidential campaign. Outside of his family, few men knew LeMay better than Kantor.

The second set of evidentiary sources is a collection of interviews with LeMay conducted after his 1965 retirement. Many of these interviews are part of the United States Air Force Oral History program, the transcripts of which are housed at the Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama.

Finally, several academic studies have evaluated LeMay's roles from World War II through his tenure as chief of staff of the Air Force. These include essays contained in professional journals and academic

dissertations. In conjunction with the secondary sources listed above, their primary purpose is to provide factual data and points of comparison rather than analysis.



Chapter 1

The Dream of Flight

Probably nothing has had a more important bearing on [my life] than my outlook as a young man toward picking out a career...I applied for flying training because I had always wanted to be a military pilot.

Curtis E. LeMay

This chapter describes LeMay's formative experiences from his childhood and continuing through his acceptance into the Air Corps in 1928. During this important period, environmental conditions and personal relationships forged LeMay's character and values. LeMay spent the majority of his childhood in Columbus, Ohio, but the origins of his legacy span from California to the eastern seaboard of the United States. LeMay's uncommon personal relationships during these childhood relocations fostered his strong sense of self-reliance and independence. Notably, young LeMay lacked a strong male role model. While he learned the value of pragmatic decision making from his mother, LeMay seemed only to pick up negative lessons—how not to live one's life—from his father. The lack of mentors, along with numerous relocations, periods of geographic isolation, and persistent poverty carried consequences: LeMay became both independent and financially savvy at an early age.

Following his modest childhood, LeMay set his mind toward a career in aviation. Toward that end, he maneuvered, hedged, sought opportunities, and networked outside of normal military channels. Along the way, he attended college at Ohio State University and joined the National Guard. Each time he faced a decision along the way, LeMay's higher goal of a flying career steered his choice. His persistence and ingenuity paid off. In September 1928, LeMay entered pilot training as an aviation cadet. Though he was not particularly remarkable at the

time, LeMay became one of the most influential military leaders in American history.

It is impossible to understand LeMay the military officer without first analyzing LeMay's formative life. Therefore, the analysis must start at the beginning. The dream of flight drove LeMay to the Army Air Corps.¹ What caused LeMay to chase that dream?

Early Childhood

Born in Columbus, Ohio, Curtis LeMay entered the world on November 15, 1906 with little fanfare.² He was the first child born to Erving and Arizona LeMay, but his monopoly on his parents' attention was short lived. Six siblings followed over the ensuing 22 years.³ Over the course of his childhood and teenage years, LeMay's position as the eldest child mandated character-shaping responsibilities.

Erving LeMay's shortfalls necessitated that his son begin to assume responsibilities at a very early age. Before the birth of his first child, Erving managed a respectable household. Though the LeMays had no silver spoons, Erving earned a steady income through his job with the railroad. However, something seemed to change soon after his son's birth. From that point on, Erving seemed unable to hold down a steady job. The expanding LeMay family moved often and struggled to put food on the table as Erving searched for employment.⁴ "We lived like nomads," an adult LeMay recalled, though he never discussed the exact sequence of events leading to his father's vocational struggles.⁵ Regardless of the root cause, the family lived in five different houses

¹ Undated interview of Curtis LeMay by MacKinlay Kantor, transcript, page 5, Box 148, Folder 1, MacKinlay Kantor Papers, 1885-1977, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Hereafter cited as "Kantor Papers."

² Warren Kozak, *LeMay: The Life and Wars of General Curtis LeMay* (Washington, D.C.: Regenery Pub., 2009), 4.

³ Kozak, *LeMay*, 3.

⁴ Kozak, *LeMay*, 4.

⁵ Curtis E. LeMay and MacKinlay Kantor, *Mission with LeMay: My Story*, 1st ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965), 12.

during LeMay's first six years of life.⁶ To compensate for his father's lack of professional focus, LeMay became single mindedly driven, remaining in one professional field for his entire adult life.⁷

LeMay displayed a fierce independent nature during his adolescence.⁸ Despite often-violent disciplinary repercussions, he longed to be free. He repeatedly ran from his home, on one occasion physically breaking out of barricaded doors. Even late in life, LeMay could not explain his manic childhood behavior.⁹ The independent spirit of Curtis LeMay first emerged in those escapes from his Columbus homes.

While Erving struggled to hold down a job, Arizona served as the LeMay family's practical provider. Warren Kozak explained, "All the children looked to her as the role model for self-sufficiency, moral strength, and grit. She instilled a strong sense of honesty, discipline, and integrity."¹⁰ All members of the LeMay family had to work hard to survive. LeMay later reflected on his mother's impact during this time. "I grew up practicing petty economies. My mother was a master-craftsman at this little art and she taught me some skills along that line."¹¹ If nothing else, Arizona was both extremely pragmatic and competent. LeMay inherited these traits in spades.

In 1914, Erving's continuing tribulations brought the LeMay family to Montana, where he again bounced from job to job. As the harsh winter loomed, Erving secured a menial job as a caretaker at a sportsman's club and fish hatchery. The LeMays moved into a rudimentary caretaker's cabin on the premises. In the isolation of the

⁶ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 17.

⁷ Kozak, *LeMay*, 5.

⁸ MacKinlay Kantor, "Boss of the Big Stick," *True*, January 1951, 65, call number 520.056-207, Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, AL, 65.

⁹ Kozak, *LeMay*, 2.

¹⁰ Kozak, *LeMay*, 5.

¹¹ "The Financial Situation," undated interview with Curtis LeMay by MacKinlay Kantor, transcript, page 2, Box 9, Folder 2, Kantor Papers.

camp, LeMay found refuge in the Montana wilderness.¹² He learned to shoot, hunt, and fish that winter; these interests became hallmarks of an elder LeMay's leisure pursuits.

The isolation of the camp bolstered LeMay's already independent spirit. With barely enough food to feed their family, a young LeMay took it upon himself to help. Using a scrap of meat as bait, he ventured into harsh winter weather to fish. In the unfrozen streams feeding the local lakes, he found abundant trout, which he dutifully brought home to the family table. Typically, LeMay remained in the cabin just long enough to warm up before heading out again for another fishing expedition.

Later in life, LeMay recalled his father's reaction to his fishing acumen: "My father was perfectly willing to sit with his socked feet up against the shiny stove fender while the frost snapped and crackled outside."¹³ When LeMay came in from the cold, his father simply moved his feet to let him pass.¹⁴ Warren Kozak summed up the dynamic between young Curtis and Erving quite well: "At this very early point in his life, Curtis surpassed his father as the responsible male figure in the LeMay family. He was eight years old."¹⁵ And at that tender age, the meaning of responsibility, the importance of competency, and the value of hard work emerged as the fundamental pillars of LeMay's character.

After spending a single difficult winter in Montana, Erving gambled—and lost again—on a new job opportunity in California. However, while his father's employment opportunities atrophied, LeMay's entrepreneurial ability blossomed. In his neighborhood of Emeryville, a small town on western shore of San Francisco Bay, LeMay met an elderly woman with a hungry cat. It seemed the cat only ate sparrows, but was itself incapable of catching the birds. LeMay quickly realized he could

¹² Kozak, *LeMay*, 7.

¹³ Kozak, *LeMay*, 7-8.

¹⁴ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 30.

¹⁵ Kozak, *LeMay*, 8.

use a small, single shot rifle, collectively shared by a group of neighborhood boys, to keep the cat's appetite at bay. In return for his marksmanship, LeMay earned a commission of five cents per bird. As the gun was a shared asset, LeMay had to split his profits with the other boys. This first independent vocational experience reinforced LeMay's growing self-reliant tendency. Further, it opened the young entrepreneur's mind to a myriad of profit-making possibilities.¹⁶

The summer of 1915 featured quite a spectacle in San Francisco: the Panama-Pacific International Exposition. Honoring completion of the Panama Canal, the 50 million-dollar exposition covered hundreds of acres of San Francisco waterfront. Notably, the 10-month exposition featured flying demonstrations performed by prominent barnstormer Lincoln Beachy. LeMay marveled at the sight of Beachy's acrobatic maneuvers above the Golden Gate bridge.¹⁷ It was only the second airplane LeMay had seen.

LeMay had first laid eyes on a heavier-than-air flying machine when he was only four or five years old. LeMay recalled looking up from the yard of his Columbus home to locate the source of a foreign sound. When he saw the aircraft flying low overhead, its engine popping and cracking, the attraction was immediate. Ignoring all reason, LeMay began running after the aircraft. He chased the Model B Wright Flyer, part of a department store publicity stunt, until it disappeared beyond the urban horizon.¹⁸ He returned home in tears, exasperated by his failure to catch the plane. LeMay claimed never to forget his first aviation experience, running in desperation after the aircraft he wanted for his own more than any other thing in the world.¹⁹

¹⁶ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 24-25.

¹⁷ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 23.

¹⁸ Kozak, *LeMay*, 2.

¹⁹ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 14.

The sight of Beachy's aircraft was no less profound. Day after day, he marveled at the biplane's gyrations over the bay. Then one Sunday afternoon in March, it abruptly ended. Flying a new monoplane aircraft, Beachy overstressed the wings and plunged to his death. In trying to understand the pilot's mortality, LeMay briefly wondered where he had gone. However, mostly he "wondered how he felt when he was alive and flying."²⁰

Less than a year after arriving in California, the family again relocated, this time to New Brighton, Pennsylvania, just northwest of Pittsburgh. Ever resourceful, LeMay quickly secured a new job delivering the local newspaper. An 11-year-old boy with a paper route is not in and of itself remarkable; but LeMay held the job the entire time his family lived in New Brighton.²¹ In stark contrast to his father's example, he set the precedent of a consistent, if modest, income stream. With only a very few transitory exceptions, LeMay enjoyed steady employment from that point until he retired.

In 1919, Erving, Arizona, and their children finally found a long-term place to call home. After five years of nomadic travel, the family settled back in Columbus, Ohio—exactly where they had set out from in 1914. LeMay spent his high school years studying and working from 511 Welch Avenue.²²

Columbus

In Columbus, LeMay approached adulthood. The values forged during earlier childhood—hard work, competency, and responsibility—remained prominent. All the children in the LeMay household contributed to the family's well being, but the burden was especially heavy on the eldest son. LeMay's enterprising nature and unusual sense of responsibility to his family drove him to search out new financial

²⁰ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 24.

²¹ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 25-26.

²² LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 26.

ventures. At the age of 14, drawing on his previous experience, he started a newspaper distribution business.²³ At the height of his paper enterprise, LeMay recalled he was responsible for “between two and three thousand customers” and multiple delivery carriers.²⁴ Once he had mastered the paper enterprise, LeMay began delivering telegrams and packages by bicycle during his few remaining free hours each week.²⁵

LeMay was extremely proud of the fact that he could buy his own clothing and school supplies and still have enough money left over to help support his family.²⁶ However, the constant work precluded participation in sports programs and play in general. Warren Kozak attributed LeMay’s attitude in large part to his mother’s influence: “His mother never complained about the work she had to do to help support the family; he followed her lead. Fun was simply a luxury he would have to pass up.”²⁷

Reflecting on LeMay’s difficult and unique childhood, MacKinlay Kantor observed, “long before he was grown to high school age, he was managing not only his little brothers and sisters, but at times his parents, with stoical sagacity.”²⁸ LeMay himself wondered why “neither his parents nor his teachers ever offered him any advice, direction, or guidance. He was always left to figure things out on his own.”²⁹

Scouting was the lone exception to teenage LeMay’s “all work” mentality. In many ways, the Boy Scouts were a perfect fit for LeMay. He had the opportunity to use his able hands, think independently, and be outdoors, all things he greatly enjoyed. The Boy Scouts could have provided a strong leader and mentor to guide LeMay, but unfortunately,

²³ Kozak, *LeMay*, 9.

²⁴ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 27.

²⁵ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 29.

²⁶ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 27.

²⁷ Kozak, *LeMay*, 9.

²⁸ Kantor, “Boss of the Big Stick,” 65.

²⁹ Kozak, *LeMay*, 10.

luck was not on his side. LeMay later described his scoutmaster as “a poor leader and unorganized.”³⁰ He continued, “if we advanced in grade or accomplishment, we had to do it on our own.”³¹ When LeMay should have had structure and guidance, his inept scoutmaster forced LeMay once again to self-reliance—an all too familiar situation for the young man. Though it was a missed opportunity for a role model, LeMay later recalled the lessons he learned as a scout and applied them to his military career: “Since I enlisted as a Flying Cadet in September of 1928, I have found many uses for the motto ‘be prepared.’”³²

As LeMay diligently worked his way through high school, he nurtured a dream of flight. When he was 16, he finally got off the ground.³³ LeMay pooled money with a friend to come up with the five dollars for a five minute orientation flight in a barnstormer—a three-seat Waco biplane. LeMay and his friend sat side by side in the front, while the pilot flew from the rear seat. Despite the short flight duration, he was hooked. Given LeMay’s independent nature, his infatuation with freedom from gravity and the rules governing terrestrial life is not surprising. He told himself that someday he was going to “fly wherever I please, stay as long as I want to, and just have fun.”³⁴ Much later in life he admitted that he never did get that joyride—for LeMay work always came before fun.³⁵

Now dedicated to his dream of becoming a pilot, LeMay evaluated his options. The only possible flight path was through the military. LeMay recognized that a college degree was a primary discriminator between candidates applying to the Army Air Corps. West Point offered

³⁰ Undated interview of Curtis LeMay by MacKinlay Kantor, transcript, page 22, Box 149, Folder 2, Kantor Papers.

³¹ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 28.

³² “35 Years of AF Leadership: 1930-1965,” 1965, Box 140, Folder 11, Kantor Papers.

³³ Kozak, *LeMay*, 10.

³⁴ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 33-34.

³⁵ Kozak, *LeMay*, 11.

many advantages, but Curtis did not think he could get a Congressional appointment. Further, West Point was a long way from Columbus and his family still needed both his financial and patriarchal support. In order to stay near home, LeMay decided the next best option was the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) program. In the fall of 1924, LeMay enrolled at Ohio State University and joined its ROTC detachment.³⁶

LeMay entered college with an unrivaled work ethic and a keen sense of pragmatism. Over the course of his childhood, he learned to be almost singularly self-reliant and understood the difference between necessities and conveniences. All these traits served LeMay well at Ohio State, as he balanced heavy course loads, a full time job, and continuing commitments to his family.

Ohio State, ROTC, and the Quest to Fly

The actual academic work at Ohio State was not really LeMay's priority. The college degree was a means to a greater goal—gaining a slot in the Air Corps pilot program. Nonetheless, the academic load for LeMay's chosen field, civil engineering, required both significant study and money. LeMay needed to earn enough money to keep up with the tuition bill and still provide financial support to his family. Like countless college students throughout the years, LeMay found striking the balance between work and school a difficult task.

Needing work during his first term at Ohio State, LeMay heard that a local steel foundry—the Buckeye Steel Casting Company—might be an option. A friend told LeMay the employment manager at the company had put himself through college and was sympathetic to students in similar circumstances. LeMay presented himself to the manager, who, in short order, hired him as a night shift worker. LeMay's job carried an

³⁶ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 34-35, 39.

impressive salary of 35 dollars per week, a lofty sum in the 1920s.³⁷ There was a downside, however. The hours were brutal for a full time college student: five o'clock in the afternoon until 3:00 in the morning, six days per week.³⁸

Working until 3:00 in the morning had its drawbacks. The most troublesome for LeMay was the difficulty of staying awake during his 9:00 a.m. seminar on "Railroad Curves," a course he failed in two successive semesters. Even in failure, however, LeMay demonstrated control. He made a measured decision to sacrifice his attention, and sometimes his consciousness, in that class so that he could be alert during his remaining classes. LeMay learned that "sometimes, in order to achieve a greater goal, sacrifices had to be made."³⁹ This lesson served him well as a commander of B-17 and B-29 units during World War II.

As LeMay persevered through college, his desire to fly became increasingly central to his actions. The nation was catching aviation fever as well. Charles Lindbergh's 1927 flight across the Atlantic was one of the most notable events adding to the excitement. LeMay recalled, "I suppose I was drawn along in the general flurry of aviation activities at that time...Lindbergh in '27. I made up mind I wanted to fly before this, but this added to it."⁴⁰ Boosting LeMay's personal obsession, a group of six Army de Havillands stopped over in Columbus during his senior year.⁴¹ All the Ohio State ROTC candidates turned out at the field to watch the spectacle. LeMay recalled, "Every time I closed my eyes for a long while afterward all I could see were leather flying helmets and

³⁷ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 37.

³⁸ Kozak, *LeMay*, 11-12.

³⁹ Kozak, *LeMay*, 12.

⁴⁰ Undated interview of Curtis LeMay by MacKinlay Kantor, transcript, page 5, Box 148, Folder 1, Kantor Papers.

⁴¹ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 40.

goggles; all I could hear was the sound of those Liberty engines.”⁴²

LeMay simply had to find a way to join the ranks of the Air Corps pilots.

In the Spring of 1928, LeMay completed the ROTC curriculum as an honor graduate. Unfortunately, his struggles with “Railroad Curves” meant that after four years of academic study he remained several credits short from earning a civil engineering degree. LeMay knew competition for Air Corps pilot slots was extremely fierce and only growing more so as aviation fever entangled young men all across the nation. As it turned out, in 1928 3,000 potential pilots applied for aviation training. Only 25 became Air Corps pilots.⁴³ The odds were long and LeMay knew it. In response, LeMay developed a plan to maximize his chances. It was simultaneously audacious, pragmatic, and self-reliant—typical LeMay.

LeMay knew that being an honor graduate from ROTC helped his chances, but he was not satisfied. Throughout the Spring, he broke down the process of getting into the Air Corps and analyzed every conceivable option. West Point graduates were at the top, a fact LeMay could not change. However, through a bizarre dynamic of the military bureaucracy writ large, he could improve significantly upon his ROTC-based position if he joined the National Guard. As luck had it, the Columbus-based Ohio National Guard was accepting new recruits. In typical LeMay fashion, he went straight to the head of the Ohio National Guard and presented his case. LeMay did not hide his ulterior motives for joining the Guard, but the Columbus unit lacked an ammunition officer, so they hired him. Besides, LeMay’s selection to attend pilot training was far from assured. Moreover, even if LeMay earned a slot, the Guard could employ LeMay in the interim.⁴⁴

⁴² LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 41.

⁴³ Kozak, *LeMay*, 14.

⁴⁴ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 43.

However, there was a catch. Following his completion of ROTC in June, the Army had commissioned LeMay as a Second Lieutenant in the Field Artillery Reserve. In order to accept a National Guard commission, LeMay first needed to resign his Army Reserve commission.⁴⁵

Sacrificing four years of ROTC work and the resultant military commission surely gave LeMay pause. In the end, however, he made a decision to sacrifice in the short term for the prospect of long-term gain. Although LeMay's official record shows 22 September 1928 as the date the Ohio National Guard commissioned him as a Second Lieutenant in the Field Artillery, he actually joined the Guard early in the summer and immediately submitted his application for aviation cadet training to the Army.⁴⁶ In the meantime, LeMay continued working at the foundry while he awaited his fate.

As summer waned, LeMay grew impatient. If the Air Corps did not accept him into the fall class of pilot training, he planned to finish his remaining academic work at Ohio State. However, he did not want to pay Ohio State's tuition only to leave for flight school. Unsurprisingly, LeMay took action into his own hands. He scraped together enough money to send a lengthy telegram to the War Department. In it, he ostensibly made his case for admittance into the program and requested an expedited reply. Remarkably, the Army answered his query in short order. The War Department's telegram back to LeMay read, "This [telegram] authorizes you to enlist as a flying cadet at the nearest Army station."⁴⁷ Second Lieutenant LeMay was going to pilot training. LeMay identified this exchange as an important one in forming his outlook:

⁴⁵ General Curtis E. LeMay, interview by Charles J. Gross, 14 September 1978, transcript, K239.0512-2124C.1, US Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, AL, 17. Also see Kozak, *LeMay*, 16.

⁴⁶ Lieutenant Colonel Pauly to General LeMay, 9 April 1964, and LeMay's official Statement of Service, Box 140, Folder 10, Kantor Papers. The discrepancy in dates is likely due to the administrative processes spanning federal and state military agencies. By all accounts, LeMay submitted his application to Cadet School early in the summer of 1928.

⁴⁷ Kozak, *LeMay*, 16.

“There are times you have to take the bull by the horns. Not just sit around counting your toes.”⁴⁸

The course of events by which LeMay earned entrance into the Flying Cadet program was remarkable for two reasons. First, LeMay utilized nearly all of the qualities he gained as young child to achieve his goal. He was pragmatic and practical in navigating Ohio State’s financial and academic requirements. He displayed competence, indeed to a point of excellence, in earning Honor Graduate status in ROTC. He uncovered the nuances of the aviation training admission process through personal initiative and hard work. Even the lack of a male role model or support structure seemed to play in LeMay’s favor when he acted self-reliantly to follow up on his application with a telegram to the War Department, showing initiative beyond his years.

Second, this event was the first triumph in what became a grand legacy of successes. LeMay maneuvered adroitly within the confines of the military bureaucracy to maximize his chances at admission. He then went completely outside of normal channels by sending a telegram to the War Department. LeMay began flight training with considerable positive momentum and confidence in his own capability to meet any task. The summer of 1928 validated Curtis LeMay to Curtis LeMay.

LeMay’s train ride to March Field in October was the capstone event of his youth. His mother’s frugal ways and practicality, combined with his father’s lack of financial stability, endeared LeMay with the character and work ethic necessary to put himself through college. His self-reliant nature, attributable to his unsettled childhood, was a primary factor in LeMay’s decisions from high school through college graduation. In no case was this more important than when LeMay entered the National Guard and “took the bull by the horns” to expedite his approval into Air Corps pilot training. These attributes ushered LeMay to the

⁴⁸ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 45.

flight line at March Field. They remained with him for the rest of his life and served as the foundation upon which all LeMay's characteristics and personality grew.



Chapter 2

The Best Navigator in the Air Corps

How can you entrust your navigation on such an important mission to a young lieutenant?

- Ira Eaker

Because that happens to be the best navigator in the Air Corps.

- Robert Olds

In October 1928, LeMay embarked on one of the most important journeys of his life, traveling by train from Ohio to California. The trip marked a milestone in LeMay's life. From that point, LeMay shifted his focus from his family back in Columbus to his own military career. His family, and the lifestyle which they shared, instilled a distinct character and set of values in LeMay. These attributes, forged through 22 years of youthful experiences, changed little over the rest of his life. LeMay disembarked the train in Riverside, California with discernable values: the importance of hard work, pragmatism, self-reliance, and a significant degree of self-confidence.

LeMay's family influenced him most during the first 20 years of his life; his military experiences and relationships took primacy during his second 20 years. While his personal character and personality were established, his leadership style and professional values were not yet developed. Military life began the process of refining LeMay's professional character almost immediately after his arrival at March Field for pilot training.

During his first year of flight school, LeMay gleaned both the importance and nuance of realistic training from two flight instructors' contrasting abilities. Experiences running a navigation school, participating in the Air Corps's foray into mail delivery, and preparing B-

17 crews for combat duty reinforced his belief that thorough training was paramount to safe aviation activities. In addition to flying duty, LeMay served as a mess officer at multiple locations. This duty, coupled with the firsthand experience of varying levels of military food and recreation services, proved to be the catalyst for LeMay's later emphasis on providing high-quality military housing and dining facilities for his men.

From 1928 through 1941, LeMay steadily built notoriety within the Air Corps. His competence, work ethic, and self-reliance combined with fortuitous timing produced opportunities. LeMay habitually capitalized. By the late 1930s, the Air Corps recognized LeMay as its best aircraft navigator. Fortuitously, LeMay met then Lieutenant Colonel Robert Olds in 1937. Olds proved to be LeMay's first role model and mentor; their relationship filled a void in the latter's life. Olds served two important roles in LeMay's career. First, he groomed LeMay into a commander who excelled under tough conditions. Second, and perhaps even more importantly, he promulgated LeMay's attributes. Olds's sponsorship made LeMay's name familiar to important future leaders, not least among them then Colonel Ira Eaker.

These experiences and relationships spanned an important time in LeMay's life. During this period, LeMay learned an aviation mindset, became a strong leader, and built a reputation for being successful under pressure. LeMay's success during and after World War II owes much to his life as a young officer. From the very beginning, military life refined LeMay's professional character. The process began even before his first military flight.

Pilot Training

Gaining admission to pilot training was but the first step in a long path to becoming an Air Corps pilot. Statistically speaking, LeMay arrived in Riverside, California, with just a 25 percent chance of

successfully completing the curriculum and earning his wings.¹ The remaining 75 percent faced one of two fates—many washed out, unable to handle the physical and mental stress of aviation, while nearly as many perished learning to take off and land. According to Warren Kozak, “LeMay feared washing out much more than death.”²

The first month of flight school did not involve any flying at all. Instead, LeMay and the other cadets spent countless hours studying aeronautical principles, aircraft systems, and engines. They also participated in a full regiment of appetite-inducing physical training. Unfortunately, the food available at March Field was barley palatable, despite the cadets’ hunger. LeMay took note.³

After a month of ground training, LeMay’s class received its primary instructor assignments. LeMay drew PeeWee Wheeler. Wheeler was a very good pilot, but LeMay noticed right away that he was not a good instructor. Wheeler lacked the ability to communicate the skills he so adroitly demonstrated while at the controls. In short order, the other four classmates assigned to Wheeler’s tutelage washed out. Wheeler received three new students and *they* washed out as well. The fear of being ostracized prevented LeMay from requesting a new instructor. Somehow, LeMay persevered, and prepared as best he could for the final primary training check ride.⁴

Compounding his anxiety over the check ride, LeMay’s flight examiner was one of the toughest at March Field, First Lieutenant Red MacKinnon.⁵ Predictably, LeMay struggled: “It wasn’t one of my better

¹ Warren Kozak, *LeMay: The Life and Wars of General Curtis LeMay* (Washington, D.C.: Regenery Pub., 2009), 18.

² Kozak, *LeMay*, 22.

³ Kozak, *LeMay*, 23.

⁴ Curtis E. LeMay and MacKinlay Kantor, *Mission with LeMay: My Story*, 1st ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965), 54-56.

⁵ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 56.

days...and I knew it,” remembered LeMay looking back on that day.⁶ Despite his obvious training shortfalls, MacKinnon saw something special in LeMay. It was a close run thing, but after holding LeMay in suspense for several minutes following the flight, MacKinnon said, “I guess I will send you on after all, but I’ll keep my eye on you.”⁷ Despite Wheeler’s poor teaching aptitude, LeMay was part of the lucky and talented 25 percent that advanced. It had been success by the slimmest of margins; LeMay left the flightline that day with a newfound understanding of good training’s overriding importance.

With his first aviation challenge complete, LeMay departed March Field for Kelly Field, Texas, home of the four-month advanced pilot training course. This short stint in Texas reinforced two of LeMay’s developing values: the importance of quality instruction and quality food service. In each of these categories, Kelly Field greatly improved upon March Field’s baseline.

When officials announced flight instructor pairings for advanced training, LeMay hit pay dirt. Joe Dawson was the antithesis of Pee Wee Wheeler. Though he lacked Wheeler’s touch at the controls, Dawson proved an exemplary instructor. LeMay recalled, “I don’t think he had the technique or the skill which Wheeler had...but the point was: *he could tell you what you were doing wrong* [emphasis in original]. He could communicate, and what an enormous difference that made.”⁸

Almost as important in LeMay’s mind, the food at Kelly was not only palatable, but also actually desirable. LeMay remembered that, at least while he was in training, “the Kelly mess was so good that no cadet on a weekend pass would stay in San Antonio. Never!”⁹ The contrasting quality of food service at the two training bases made quite an

⁶ Kozak, *LeMay*, 25.

⁷ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 58.

⁸ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 62.

⁹ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 54.

impression on LeMay. This issue proved to influence his choice of jobs and organizational decisions for the following 30 years. LeMay “was haunted by the astounding contrast between a meal at March and a Meal at Kelly.”¹⁰

LeMay completed advanced flight training at Kelly Field on 12 October 1929. In addition to his wings, LeMay earned a commission with the rank of Second Lieutenant in the Air Corps Reserves—his third commissioning at such rank in 16 months.¹¹ The Air Corps assigned LeMay to the First Pursuit Group at Selfridge Field, Michigan.¹²

Selfridge Field

Given the economic strife facing average citizens during the Great Depression, a young Air Corps pilot had a good life. LeMay’s salary and flight pay covered his expenses and allowed him periodically to send some money to his family.¹³ Some months, there was even a little left over for savings. Performing at public events constituted the majority of LeMay’s flying duties. There was no war to prepare for in those days, and LeMay recalled, “nobody worked very hard.”¹⁴

However, the pilots did hold down ground jobs in addition to their flying activities. LeMay’s second job was Selfridge Field mess officer. He instantly thought of the great program he had experienced at Kelly, but knew a Second Lieutenant carried only so much weight. Instead of revamping the entire program, LeMay picked his battles. He left the food preparation to the competent and experienced incumbent mess sergeant. However, he noticed some irregularities in the bookkeeping, and made it a point to square up the accounts. As is often the case for Army

¹⁰ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 74.

¹¹ Lieutenant Colonel Pauly to General LeMay, 9 April 1964, and LeMay’s official Statement of Service, Box 140, Folder 10, MacKinlay Kantor Papers, 1885-1977, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Hereafter cited as “Kantor Papers.”

¹² Kozak, *LeMay*, 27.

¹³ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 99.

¹⁴ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 76.

lieutenants, LeMay's most important job was to learn.¹⁵ In an interview after his retirement, LeMay recalled, "I was interested in messes ever since this mess officer job at Selfridge Field. I never went to the cook and bakers school like some of them, but I worked on it a little bit and I learned a lot from a mess sergeant. But we had a good mess after I learned the ropes a little bit."¹⁶ LeMay served as mess officer several more times as a junior officer. He put that experience to good use once he attained enough rank to truly effect change in Air Force culinary facilities.

While mess officer duties were interesting, LeMay was battling a nagging sensation about his unfinished civil engineering degree. LeMay feared his superiors might look down on an officer without a college diploma. He felt if he was to have a career in the Air Corps, he simply had to complete his outstanding courses. The ever-resourceful LeMay saw an opportunity in the relatively slow pace at Selfridge, hatched a plan, and took action. LeMay knew there was a temporary duty slot for a Regular pilot to augment the Reserve flying operation back in Columbus. The tour was six months long, and LeMay figured that was just enough time to complete his final 15 credits. After several failed attempts, he succeeded in convincing his superiors to approve him for the temporary duty at Norton Field. Arriving in October 1931, LeMay coordinated with Norton's senior officer to fulfill his military duties during afternoons and on weekends.¹⁷ That left his mornings free to complete the credits he needed for his Ohio State diploma.¹⁸ It was a busy six months, but seven and one half years after enrolling at Ohio State University, LeMay earned his college degree. Just as he had during his attempts to gain

¹⁵ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 75.

¹⁶ Undated interview of Curtis LeMay by MacKinlay Kantor, transcript, page 12, Box 147, Folder 17, Kantor Papers.

¹⁷ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 78-83.

¹⁸ Kozak, *LeMay*, 31.

acceptance to pilot, LeMay had once again forged his own path to success.

After his stint at Norton, LeMay happily returned to Selfridge's normal flying routine. However, the social and economic problems of American society were conspiring against Air Corps pilots. President Franklin D. Roosevelt needed a program to assist the unemployed and often unfed sectors of society. The Civilian Conservation Corps, or CCC, was his answer. The program put thousands of young men to work in national parks and forests. The men lived together in large camps, but the U.S. government could not afford to install civilian administrators at the installations. Lacking a looming national security threat, Roosevelt turned to the military, which reluctantly took on the task that ultimately proved beneficial, as thousands of Army regular and reserve junior officers gained invaluable leadership experience that served them well in World War II. That is how Second Lieutenant LeMay found himself as the deputy commander of a CCC camp outside of Brethren, Michigan.¹⁹

While LeMay undoubtedly preferred flying duty, his short time working at the CCC camp refined two aspects of his character. First, the position of authority offered LeMay his first chance to lead men. These were not military men, and they certainly lacked many of the qualities inherent to aviators, but they were men nonetheless. LeMay was a natural leader, but his skill was unrefined. The CCC camp was a laboratory in which LeMay was free to try out different leadership techniques. He could do so without fearing the more serious consequences associated with failing to lead military men, especially in a time of war.²⁰

Second, the CCC camp offered LeMay another opportunity to refine his mess officer skills. As one of only two officers in the camp, LeMay could now significantly shape the operation. Poor supply lines to the

¹⁹ Kozak, *LeMay*, 33-35. Also see LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 87-88.

²⁰ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 89.

camp's relatively austere location, coupled with the camp's limited refrigeration capability, compounded the problem of preparing decent food. LeMay coordinated fresh meat supplies by rail, purchased fresh produce from local farmers, and pulled trained cooks working at the camp from fieldwork in order to concentrate on kitchen duty. LeMay quipped, "We didn't eat like kings, perhaps, but maybe dukes."²¹ More importantly, LeMay realized his camp's morale problems all but disappeared when the men had good food.²²

LeMay left CCC duty and returned to Selfridge in the late summer of 1933. He had only been back for a few weeks when fate came knocking upon LeMay's door. The unit at Selfridge needed to send an officer to the Air Corps's new Navigation School at Langley Field. LeMay got the slot. Harold Gatty, an aircraft navigation pioneer and veteran of a 1931 round the world flight, led the three-month course at Langley.²³ Though Gatty was a tremendous navigator, he proved to be a mediocre instructor. These characteristics reminded LeMay of Pee Wee Wheeler. Overall, the course proved to be only a primer on navigation concepts. LeMay later remembered, "We really didn't learn very much [about navigation], but we got exposed to it."²⁴

Nonetheless, it was valuable experience. The navigational lessons intrigued LeMay, but what really got him excited was "blind" flying. At Langley, LeMay was one of the first to practice flying an aircraft solely based on information provided by instruments in the cockpit. LeMay hung around after class and constantly peppered his instructors with questions.²⁵ Through his interest, he accumulated more time "under the

²¹ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 91

²² LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 88.

²³ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 94.

²⁴ Undated interview of Curtis LeMay by MacKinlay Kantor, transcript, page 11, Box 147, Folder 14, Kantor Papers.

²⁵ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 95-98.

hood” than any other pilot in the Air Corps.²⁶ LeMay did not realize it at the time, but after three months of instrument and navigation practice, he was among the most qualified and best-trained aerial navigators in the Army. The first brick in the foundation of LeMay’s legend had been set in place.

In early 1934, President Roosevelt again made a decision to use the military to fill a mission traditionally held by civilians. This decision, similar to the one that directed the Army to oversee the CCC, held direct consequences for LeMay. This time the task was delivering the mail. It proved to be the final important event of LeMay’s time at Selfridge.

With only 10 days to prepare to distribute mail across the nation—a mission nobody in the Air Corps had considered before—the air arm, predictably, struggled. The pilots, lacking additional pay, rarely enjoyed proper lodging accommodations during their missions. The limited number of maintenance men struggled to keep aircraft flying, often without normal tools or spare parts. Most damning, however, were the difficult winter flight conditions. LeMay remembered, “We overdid it: that’s the reason we lost some people and wrecked a lot of airplanes. We were attempting to do more than we were capable of doing at that time, or had the equipment to do.”²⁷ After just a few months, Roosevelt cancelled the program and commercial air carriers resumed responsibility for mail delivery. In LeMay’s mind, the maligned airmail experience was proof that navigation and instrument flying were integral to the future of aviation.²⁸ Very soon, LeMay was to take on a leading role in promoting the value of precise long-range navigation.

²⁶ General Curtis E. LeMay, interview by Dr. Edgar F. Puryear, Jr., 17 November 1976, transcript, page 18, K239.0512-1450, US Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, AL. Hereafter cited as “LeMay interview by Puryear.”

²⁷ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 106.

²⁸ LeMay interview by Puryear, 17-18.

Hawaii

In September 1934, after nearly five years at Selfridge, the Air Corps transferred LeMay to Wheeler Field, Hawaii. He only had 10 days notice to pack and prepare for the trip. Normally LeMay took such notifications in stride, but this time he faced an additional challenge—breaking the news to his wife. LeMay and Helen Maitland had been married less than three months.

Shortly after his arrival, Hawaii made a long-lasting impression upon LeMay. There was no housing available on base, and Oahu offered nothing that met the expectations of LeMay's new bride. After weeks of searching, they finally compromised on a beach cottage. LeMay described the cottage as "a living-room; one bedroom; tiny kitchen opening right onto the beach. No hot water in the bath. Matter of fact, the bath was a shower, with a floor made of wooden slats. You stood on the slats, and the water went right through to the sand."²⁹ Helen LeMay was not thrilled, and she let her husband know it. It was the first time in LeMay's career he needed to balance professional duties with family responsibilities. He remembered the toll the poor housing situation took on his budding family, to the benefit of thousands of SAC airmen in the 1950s.

All the officers assigned to the 6th Pursuit Squadron had duties outside of flying. LeMay again served as mess officer, but also communications officer, engineering officer, and assistant operations officer at Wheeler.³⁰ However, his additional duties during nine very important months overshadowed all the others.

The War Department's 1938 biography of then First Lieutenant LeMay reads, "he commanded the Hawaiian Department Advanced Aviation School from September 1935 to May 1936."³¹ His experience at

²⁹ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 113.

³⁰ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 113.

³¹ LeMay biography, 14 February 1948, Box 141, Folder 3, Kantor Papers.

the Gatty program at Langley got him the job and it was here, flying off the coast of Hawaii, that LeMay truly learned navigation.³² LeMay worked with Lieutenant John Egan, a classmate of his from advanced training at Kelly and a fellow graduate of the Langley navigation school, to refine the curriculum.³³

Once students arrived for the class, LeMay worked harder than ever. LeMay recalled his time as extremely busy; even Helen got into the act, helping LeMay practice celestial navigation shots at night. “We were just one jump ahead of the students all the time in this class. We had to study harder than they did, and spend more time on homework than they did, and more time on practice so that we could take a shot and say ‘look, here it is.’”³⁴ Despite his role as instructor, LeMay knew he “still had personally a lot to learn about navigation; would have, for a long time to come.”³⁵

As LeMay’s comprehension of navigation grew, so did his appreciation for its myriad of potential applications. All these applications seemed to point toward one common future: long-range aircraft. During his time in Hawaii, LeMay had an epiphany of sorts. He had focused purely on pursuit aviation to that point. However, by the summer of 1936, LeMay knew he was destined to move to bombardment aircraft. LeMay gave credit for his change of heart to his experience at the Hawaii navigation school: “The navigation school really got me thinking about long range flying and the defense of the islands. It became apparent that we had to have longer-range airplanes. If we were going to get into the strategic type of role, you had to get into bombardment. Bombardment would be really the strong arm, and

³² Undated interview of Curtis LeMay by MacKinlay Kantor, transcript, page 11, Box 147, Folder 14, Kantor Papers.

³³ Barrett Tillman, *LeMay* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 10.

³⁴ Undated interview of Curtis LeMay by MacKinlay Kantor, transcript, page 13, Box 147, Folder 14, Kantor Papers.

³⁵ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 115.

probably the primary arm of the Air Force. This became apparent...so I made up my mind I wanted to try to get into bombardment on my next assignment.”³⁶ It was one of the most important decisions of LeMay’s life. The decision was critical not only for LeMay, but also for the Allied effort in World War II and the future United States Air Force.

Langley Field

When it came time to fill out his preference sheet for a new assignment, LeMay listed the Second Bomb Group at Langley Field as his top choice.³⁷ The Air Corps indulged him, and he arrived at Langley in 1937. His arrival shortly preceded that of Langley’s first B-17. For LeMay, it was love at first sight.³⁸ His life became inseparable from the four-engine aircraft for the next seven years.

LeMay’s initial job at Langley was assistant operations officer of the 49th Bomb Squadron. He quickly advanced to operations officer in the same unit. One day while LeMay was in the 49th, the group operations officer fell ill. LeMay reported to take his place. LeMay described the job as “a hell of an exalting job for a newcomer.”³⁹ Fortunately for LeMay, his new boss was Lieutenant Colonel Robert Olds.

As leaders go, few were more demanding or more competent than Olds. Olds, a true believer in the primacy of heavy bombardment, was something of a legend in the Air Corps. The former aide of General Billy Mitchell led by a simple axiom: once you tell people what to do, get out of their way.⁴⁰ Olds made a deep impression upon LeMay.

LeMay recalled, “Up until this time, I'd been in the Air Force [sic] seven years, and looking back on it I hadn't really absorbed very much. I

³⁶ Undated interview of Curtis LeMay by MacKinlay Kantor, transcript, page 2, Box 147, Folder 14, Kantor Papers.

³⁷ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 125.

³⁸ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 131.

³⁹ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 131.

⁴⁰ Tillman, *LeMay*, 15. Also see LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 132.

really didn't have a very good idea of what we were there for.”⁴¹ Olds began informing LeMay of the importance of the mission from the latter's first day on the job. According to Olds, “the whole purpose of the Air Corps was to fly and fight in a war, and to be ready to fly and fight in that war at any given moment if the war should come.”⁴² Olds was the first person to offer such an insight to LeMay. Much later, LeMay remembered Olds as “the first one that I had come in contact with that really got through to me a sense of urgency in getting things done and getting ready to fight.”⁴³ Without doubt, LeMay learned more about leadership and managing a flying organization in that tour under Olds than he had in his previous Air Corps career.⁴⁴

Under the guidance of Olds, LeMay's flying career rapidly gained notoriety. An often-repeated story line began to emerge. LeMay's technical proficiency and work ethic would ensure some small success. Olds would take notice and give LeMay additional responsibility. LeMay would then step up to the new challenge, and again deliver success. Olds seemed to benefit as much as LeMay. Eventually, the two men delivered results so notable that the Air Corps as a whole was paying attention. First, in a loose repeat of Mitchell's notorious airpower demonstration against the *Ostfriesland*, they successfully located and attacked (with water bombs) a Navy battleship at sea. Then they completed several long-distance, intercontinental B-17 flights, highlighting the bombers range and navigational prowess. Finally, in a publicity stunt designed to bolster the Air Corps maritime legitimacy, they intercepted an Italian ocean liner more than 500 miles off the east coast of the United States.

⁴¹ LeMay interview by Puryear, 21.

⁴² LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 131.

⁴³ Undated interview of Curtis LeMay by MacKinlay Kantor, transcript, pages 59-60, Box 148, Folder 9, Kantor Papers.

⁴⁴ Undated interview of Curtis LeMay by MacKinlay Kantor, transcript, page 61, Box 148, Folder 9, Kantor Papers.

When Billy Mitchell's aviators bombed the *Ostfriesland* in July 1921, it was far from a conclusive display of airpower's triumph over naval vessels. Moored stationary and defenseless, the German battleship was hardly a realistic target.⁴⁵ The Air Corps hoped for less controversial results from a two-day exercise in August 1937 dubbed Joint Air Exercise Number 4.⁴⁶ Given an initial position and vector, Olds and LeMay were to find the USS *Utah* and bomb it with water-filled bombs. The *Utah* was to do its best to avoid detection and prevent successful attacks. Unlike the *Ostfriesland* sinking 15 years earlier, this time the Navy held all the advantages.

According to LeMay, the Navy chose the exercise area, a few hundred miles off the California coast, specifically because of its prevalent fog banks. Further, all intelligence reports on the *Utah*'s initial position were to come to the B-17s through Navy channels. Finally, the Navy did not allocate any extra water-filled bombs to the B-17 crews. They entered the exercise with only a guess as to the ballistic characteristics of these unique expendables.⁴⁷

The exercise began poorly for LeMay and Olds. The Navy failed to provide any update to the *Utah*'s position. In desperation, Olds ordered his B-17s airborne. All they could do was visually search the vast exercise area visually for the battleship. With darkness approaching, the Navy finally relayed the *Utah*'s position. As luck had it, the location was near LeMay's aircraft. Olds and LeMay descended and conducted a thorough search of the area, but the *Utah* was nowhere to be seen. Olds was frustrated and set in on his venerable navigator: "Are you sure you knew where that boat was supposed to be?"⁴⁸ LeMay answered

⁴⁵ For a complete summary of the *Ostfriesland* sinking, see Bernard C. Nalty, *Winged Shield, Winged Sword: A History of the United States Air Force* (Washington D.C.: Air Force History and Museums Program, 1997), 94-96.

⁴⁶ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 140.

⁴⁷ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 142-44.

⁴⁸ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 146.

affirmatively. Olds continued, “How do you know we were there?”⁴⁹ LeMay pointed to their current position on his chart, then to the California coast. After a few quick calculations, he handed Olds a piece of paper with an estimated time of arrival to San Francisco. At the appointed minute, Olds looked down and saw the city’s lights. Olds was puzzled. If LeMay’s navigation had been correct, why had they missed the *Utah*?

That night, as the crews rested for the second and final day of the exercise, Olds brought LeMay promising news. The Navy had admitted the position estimate they passed was off by a degree—an error of 60 miles.⁵⁰ The Navy’s admission vindicated LeMay’s navigation. On the second day of the exercise, the absence of Navy position reports forced Olds’s B-17s to launch in the blind.

After several hours, the B-17s received a position update for *Utah* and LeMay ran the numbers. It was bad news. The battleship was too far away for the B-17 to reach before the exercise window closed. However, moments after LeMay relayed this message to his crew, Olds spotted the *Utah*. With no time to waste, the B-17 quickly prosecuted an attack, scoring three direct hits.

As the bombers turned for the coast, LeMay, puzzled by the unexpected appearance of the ship, returned to his calculations. His position estimate and computations all checked—the *Utah* should have been some 60 miles south of where the B-17s located it, a difference of an entire degree of latitude. Audaciously, the Navy had passed an erroneous position for the second day in a row. Only good fortune had placed the bombers over the *Utah*’s actual location.⁵¹

The Navy quickly covered up the results from Joint Air Exercise Number 4. They were simply too damaging to both its institutional

⁴⁹ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 146.

⁵⁰ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 147.

⁵¹ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 149-51.

interests and the nation's security to be made fully public. Despite the media blackout, the exercise was greatly important to LeMay. Following the *Utah* incident, LeMay knew that Olds believed wholeheartedly in two things: the efficacy of precision navigation and the tremendous ability of LeMay.⁵² From that day on, Olds sponsored LeMay.⁵³ The former proved instrumental to LeMay's career, including his selection as wartime commander of the 305th Bomb Group.

With public news of the *Utah* incident suppressed, Air Corps leaders needed another demonstration of the potential of air power. They chose a series of long distance flights to South America. The first of these flights was a goodwill gesture of the United States upon the occasion of the inauguration of Argentina's new President, Roberto Maria Ortiz, in February 1938.⁵⁴ The aircrews had to overcome a lack of maps, unpredictable weather, limited ground support, and hypoxia.⁵⁵ Nonetheless, the flight was a huge success. For their efforts, Olds's group earned the Mackay Trophy, awarded to the year's most significant flight.⁵⁶ Olds earned the Distinguished Flying Cross for his leadership of the event.⁵⁷ LeMay, along with the other crewmembers, walked away with a Meritorious Service Medal.⁵⁸ These accolades assuredly commended hard work, but something more important was also happening. The leaders of the Air Corps were beginning to take note of LeMay.

Ira Eaker was certainly taking note. Eaker, then a full colonel serving as the Air Corps's chief of information, later held important

⁵² Undated interview of Curtis LeMay by MacKinlay Kantor, transcript, pages 13-14, Box 148, Folder 1, Kantor Papers.

⁵³ LeMay interview by Puryear, 32.

⁵⁴ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 153.

⁵⁵ Kozak, *LeMay*, 59-60.

⁵⁶ Tillman, *LeMay*, 16.

⁵⁷ Robert Olds's Statement of Military Service, 11 May 1955, page 3, Box 141, Folder 2, Kantor Papers.

⁵⁸ "Proceedings of the Trophy and Awards Board," 25 February 1938, page 1, Box 141, Folder 3, Kantor Papers.

leadership positions as a general officer. In 1965, on the occasion of LeMay's retirement, Eaker penned a newspaper article honoring the former's accomplishments. In that article, Eaker described the first time he met his subordinate:

"I first met LeMay in 1937 at the time of the preparation for the flight of six of our new Flying Fortress bombers to Buenos Aires. Lt. Col Robert Olds, who had been selected to lead that flight, came to my office in the Munitions building in Washington, looking for flight maps to South America. Olds introduced a stocky, reserved, black-haired young officer as Lt. Curtis E. LeMay, his navigator. After LeMay had gone to the map room, I said to Olds, 'Bob, this is an important mission you are undertaking. It is designed to demonstrate the over-seas, intercontinental range of our new bomber. If you are successful, the General Staff and the Congress may give us some more of them. How can you entrust your navigation to a young lieutenant?' Olds replied promptly, 'Because Lieutenant LeMay happens to be the best navigator in the Army Air Corps.'⁵⁹

The meeting between Eaker, Olds, and LeMay is remarkable. Olds clearly demonstrated a remarkable trust in and allegiance to LeMay. Because the Argentina flight, like most of LeMay's endeavors, was highly successful, Eaker gained confidence in both Olds's judgment and LeMay's technical prowess. Olds and LeMay were a spectacular team.

LeMay's final significant prewar event, one that expanded his reputation greatly in the Air Corps, involved locating a ship far out at sea. The *Utah* had been only 200-300 miles off the coast. This time the intercept was to take place at more than twice that range. Locating a single ship at that range was a significant challenge.

Eaker, along with General Headquarters Air Force commander, General Frank Andrews, planned the exercise. They contracted the Italian liner *Rex* to play the role of an attacking enemy ship. The plan called for the *Rex* to radio her position around midnight. The three B-

⁵⁹ "Memories of Gen. LeMay," *San Antonio Express*, 20 Jan 1965, page 26, Box 141, Folder 6, Kantor Papers.

17s planned to launch to intercept the ship at roughly noon the following day.⁶⁰

Eaker was confident in Olds and LeMay's ability to find the ship. The last thing he wanted was the Navy squelching his publicity stunt. Eaker upped the ante. He placed civilian reporters and radio personnel on board the B-17s to provide a running commentary to stateside radio stations. Eaker expected millions of people to hear the results of the flight in real time. For LeMay, the pressure had never been higher.⁶¹

Reminiscent of the *Utah* exercise, the *Rex* failed to provide an updated position report at the directed time. When LeMay showed up to fly, the latest position he had was nearly 24 hours old. To make matters worse, the weather forecasters predicted thunderstorms, turbulence, and low ceilings both en route to and above the planned intercept area. LeMay considered everything and predicted a 12:25 p.m. intercept, assuming *Rex* was on the proper course.⁶²

The B-17 crews took off at 8:30 a.m. and battled the rough weather for the better part of four hours. At 12:25 p.m., just as LeMay had predicted, the *Rex* appeared underneath the lead aircraft. Radio stations across the east coast came alive with the story of the Air Corps's B-17s successful intercept 600 miles out to sea.

It was a big news story. *Time* magazine devoted two pages to the event, though they misidentified the lead B-17 navigator as "Curtis Selby."⁶³ Coverage of the intercept and its parent exercise by the *New York Times* included a three-day series of articles that correctly identified LeMay as the lead B-17 navigator.⁶⁴ More than 1,800 newspapers

⁶⁰ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 185-86.

⁶¹ Tillman, *LeMay*, 16.

⁶² LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 187.

⁶³ "National Affairs," *Time*, 23 May 1938, 10-11.

⁶⁴ Hanson W. Baldwin, "217 Planes Start Biggest Wargame," *New York Times*, 12 May 1938, 1; Hanson W. Baldwin, "Flying Fortresses' Meet Liner at Sea," *New York Times*,

nationwide ran a picture of the lead B-17 triumphantly cruising past the *Rex* at mast level.⁶⁵

The media attention proved to be the end of LeMay's anonymity. His name was synonymous with "B-17" and "navigation." Peers, subordinates, superiors alike recognized LeMay's special stature. LeMay knew they had done accomplished something special. Some 30 years later, in his book *America is in Danger*, LeMay declared the interception of the *Rex* as nothing less than the realization of Billy Mitchell's prophecies of airpower.⁶⁶

As war in Europe loomed, LeMay's professional character was congealing. Technical competence was his most important value. He possessed a unique appreciation for realistic aviation training; one that was fostered during pilot training and while flying air mail missions. LeMay also recognized the importance of quality military services, chiefly housing and mess facilities. When the food and family housing was poor, morale and performance suffered. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, LeMay now had a military support system of his own. Robert Olds groomed LeMay for command and continued to sponsor his career. Ira Eaker, impressed by LeMay's record of performance, stood ready to give LeMay topcover, an important catalyst for effective leadership. In time, LeMay's solidifying character faced the test of leading men in war.

13 May 1938, 3; Hanson W. Baldwin, "Planes Bomb 'Foe' in Mimic Combat," *New York Times*, 13 May 1938, 4.

⁶⁵ DeWitt S. Copp, *A Few Great Captains: The Men and Events That Shaped the Development of U.S. Air Power*, 1st ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1980), 423.

⁶⁶ Curtis E. LeMay and Dale O. Smith, *America Is in Danger* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1968), X.

Chapter 3

Iron Ass LeMay

If you fly straight and level for as much as ten seconds, you'll get knocked down.

- Colonel Frank Anderson to LeMay, late October 1942

I told my outfit that I was going straight in [without maneuvering]...and that I would be flying the lead aircraft.

- LeMay at his first combat mission briefing, 23 November 1942

Leading men into combat is perhaps the truest test of character and leadership. Compared to peacetime, during war the problems are more difficult and the consequences of failure are often fatal. Despite copious training and experience before hostilities, many otherwise fine leaders break underneath the crushing pressure of combat. It is no surprise that experiences and lessons learned during combat are particularly effective and long lasting. LeMay's tenure as commander of the 305th Bomb Group and Third Air Division was no exception.

In May 1942, LeMay took command of the 305th Bomb Group, a unit that at that time was just forming; it had just a handful of partially trained crews and only a few aircraft.¹ Nonetheless, LeMay immediately started building the 305th into a top unit the only way he knew how—hard work. He struck a delicate balance between the aircrew members' preparation for combat and their need for off-duty recuperation. Some of the crew felt LeMay pushed them too hard and in their frustration, bestowed upon their commander a crude nickname—"Iron Ass" LeMay was born.²

¹ Curtis E. LeMay and MacKinlay Kantor, *Mission with LeMay: My Story*, 1st ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965), 213-15.

² LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 217.

The moniker did not bother LeMay. He only cared about results, and when the 305th began flying combat missions LeMay realized the fruits of its stateside labor. From November 1942 through the end of hostilities in Europe, no unit matched the 305th's performance.

During this time, LeMay remained true to the lessons of his early life. He continued to place a premium on performance and competence, in both himself and his men. He insisted on leading his group's toughest missions. He remained independent and innovative, developing new tactics and continuously refining procedures. Not coincidentally, soon after its arrival in theater, the 305th became the model for all of Eighth Bomber Command to emulate. The relationships LeMay had developed previously with Colonel Olds and General Eaker continued to bear fruit as well. The sage tandem provided LeMay a unique combination of support and advice, which greatly facilitated his success in the European theater.

Expansion

When World War II began in Europe on 1 September 1939, the Air Corps was rapidly expanding. The goal of this expansion, and the *raison d'être* of the Air Corps, was a large number of long-range bombers capable of crippling an enemy state. However, at that time the Air Corps only had 23 B-17s, and the B-24 was still in development.³ In stark contrast, by the time Japanese aircraft struck Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, the B-17 fleet numbered nearly 200 tails and military aircraft production increased almost 900 percent.⁴ For LeMay, still a First Lieutenant after more than 10 years of service, the expansion opened avenues for promotion and increased responsibility.⁵

³ Bernard C. Nalty, *Winged Shield, Winged Sword: A History of the United States Air Force* (Washington D.C.: Air Force History and Museums Program, 1997), 158-65.

⁴ Nalty, *Winged Shield, Winged Sword*, 174.

⁵ LeMay's official Statement of Service, Box 140, Folder 10, MacKinlay Kantor Papers, 1885-1977, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Hereafter cited as "Kantor Papers."

Often, expansion proceeded on paper before assets were in place to support additional units. LeMay described the process as one similar to “splitting kindling sticks.”⁶ A bomb group would split in two, then only a short time later those new groups would again splinter. This process opened up numerous leadership positions: every new group required a group commander, group operations officer, and multiple squadron commanders. For those officers with bomber experience and seniority, the promotion system jumped into overdrive. LeMay put on his captain’s bars in January 1940. Less than two years later he was a lieutenant colonel.⁷

In 1940, LeMay earned a squadron command within the 34th Bomb Group, but his vast B-17 experience made him upwardly mobile. Soon, he advanced to the job of group operations officer.⁸ Remarkably, before he could settle into those duties, plans changed again when an old friend called. Colonel C.V. Haynes, who had piloted LeMay’s B-17 during a 1938 publicity flight to Colombia, needed a highly skilled navigator for a unique mission.⁹ LeMay was the obvious choice.

Haynes’ unique mission involved ferrying B-24s destined for the Royal Air Force Bomber Command from Canada to England. The sheer distance involved, magnetic variation, and prevailing foul weather conditions made the Atlantic crossing difficult. Compounding that difficulty was the fact that, outside of a handful of test pilots, no one in the Air Corps had ever flown a B-24.¹⁰

Before commencing operations, LeMay and the other pilots had to get checked out in the Liberator. Two additional pilots joined LeMay and Haynes at Wright field. Accompanied by a test pilot, the quartet climbed

⁶ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 197.

⁷ LeMay’s official Statement of Service, Box 140, Folder 10, Kantor Papers.

⁸ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 197-98.

⁹ Thomas M. Coffey, *Iron Eagle: The Turbulent Life of General Curtis LeMay*, 1st ed. (New York: Crown Publishers, 1986), 11.

¹⁰ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 199-201.

aboard the new bomber. They took turns flying in the pattern and each got one landing. LeMay left Wright field with 15 minutes of B-24 flight time and one landing to his credit. The next time he flew one, it carried him across the Atlantic Ocean. LeMay ferried B-24s for several months, gaining valuable experience both in the new airframe and in the intricacies of crossing the Atlantic.¹¹ He realized then that green crews required specific training to complete the journey safely. He could not have known that in only 18 months he was to lead his own bomb group along the same route of flight to Europe.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor affected LeMay, who had returned to his duties as operations officer of the 34th Bomb Group, in a unique way. Like most Americans, he was frustrated, angered, and felt sympathy for the victims. However, the attacks also brought LeMay a sense of relief. He knew he was going to war, sooner rather than later.¹² The waiting and uncertainty was almost over.

The aftermath of Pearl Harbor brought chaos to the American military establishment—LeMay saw it firsthand. To counter the perceived Japanese invasion threat, LeMay's 34th Bomb Group deployed to Pendleton, Oregon. Upon arriving, LeMay received a telegram directing him back to Wright Field in Dayton. The Army Air Force needed LeMay's B-24 expertise, honed during numerous Atlantic ferry missions, at Wright for acceptance testing of aircraft bound for American units.¹³ After only a month in Dayton, LeMay returned to Pendleton to rejoin the 34th, but he never had the chance to unpack his bags. The commander of the newly formed 306th Bomb Group in Wendover, Utah wanted LeMay to be his executive officer—number two in command.¹⁴ That job, too, lasted little more than a month. From December 1941

¹¹ Warren Kozak, *LeMay: The Life and Wars of General Curtis LeMay* (Washington, D.C.: Regenery Pub., 2009), 66-67.

¹² Coffey, *Iron Eagle*, 9.

¹³ Kozak, *LeMay*, 74.

¹⁴ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 209.

through May 1942, LeMay moved five times. LeMay's sixth job proved to have a much longer duration, and encompassed one of the most remarkable periods of his career.

Preparing for War

LeMay assumed command of the 305th Bomb Group, stationed at Salt Lake City Army Air Base, on 4 June 1942.¹⁵ Less than two weeks later, he was promoted to full colonel.¹⁶ LeMay's command had humble beginnings. Initially, he only had four operable B-17s. Counting himself, there were three pilots with B-17 experience. He had no navigators and no bombardiers.¹⁷

To make the difficult situation worse, the Japanese threat to the American west coast forced the humble group to relocate to Spokane, Washington. There a few B-24s joined the 305th's handful of B-17s to form a composite group and LeMay struggled with the logistical complications brought on by maintaining two different airframes. For several weeks, the 305th's sole focus was to prepare to engage the Japanese fleet. LeMay's crews focused on the counter sea mission, and sacrificed other training that previously had been a priority. Fortunately, the perceived threat to the western seaboard relented as quickly as it appeared. The American victory at the Battle of Midway diffused the crisis.¹⁸

The 305th, minus its borrowed B-24s, redeployed to a new home base. On 4 July 1942, LeMay and his Group arrived at Muroc Dry Lake, California. Muroc featured a terrific runway, but that was the airfield's lone redeeming attribute. Miles of barren wasteland surrounded the runway and there were no barracks or latrines. LeMay claimed the only building, a decrepit stone structure with half a roof, as the group

¹⁵ Coffey, *Iron Eagle*, 16.

¹⁶ LeMay's official Statement of Service, Box 140, Folder 10, Kantor Papers.

¹⁷ Coffey, *Iron Eagle*, 16.

¹⁸ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 215-16.

headquarters.¹⁹ He had less than three months to ready his group for war.

The summer of 1942 was a turning point in LeMay's career. The sum of his formative experiences armed him for this moment, yet his task seemed nearly insurmountable. Where success—in the form of a well trained, disciplined, competent, and survivable combat group—promised to galvanize his character, failure would have the opposite effect, casting doubts on the validity of the most fundamental aspects of his psyche. Tough challenges were nothing new to LeMay. He had faced long odds during his childhood. He put himself through college while supporting his family. He earned a slot at pilot training only after exploring every possible angle to increase his chances of admission. LeMay knew tough challenges; and at every point in his life, he had out-worked the odds.

The words of Robert Olds, LeMay's mentor and former boss, had never been more prescient: "The whole purpose of the Air Corps was to fly and fight in a war."²⁰ While Olds's influence set the priorities, LeMay's personal pilot training experience—featuring the excellent Joe Dawson and underwhelming Pee Wee Wheeler—helped him plot his course.

Predictably, LeMay's solution involved hard work. He could only count on three flyable aircraft and he had but three competent instructor pilots.²¹ Time was short—the only way he could train all his men was to train all day. He put the group on a round-the-clock flying schedule, seven days per week. He ordered the maintenance crews to keep aircraft flyable to the greatest extent practical and ensured whenever a plane landed a new crew was ready to jump in and get the plane back into the air. The group's three instructors, including LeMay, spent eight to 12

¹⁹ Coffey, *Iron Eagle*, 19.

²⁰ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 131.

²¹ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 217.

hours per day in the air, their only respite occurring when serious maintenance problems grounded a plane. LeMay granted the crewmembers one day off every two weeks.²² For their part, few of the men appreciated the endless training, austere facilities, or their callous commander. LeMay earned a new nickname that summer in the Mojave Desert: "Iron Ass."²³ For his part, despite the copious effort, LeMay was unhappy with the progress. In a 1943 interview, he stated bluntly, "none of the personnel was ready for combat at all."²⁴ In fact, the harsh training completely broke several of the men. LeMay was glad the men's shortcomings emerged in the California desert rather than in the skies above Germany. He later recalled, "When such weaknesses show up in combat they are likely to cost something. During training, they didn't cost us so much."²⁵

LeMay was out of time. With partially trained navigators, bombardiers, and gunners still flowing in from training, the 305th began the long journey to Europe. In late August, the ground element left Muroc by train. The aviation package rallied at Syracuse, New York, while they waited for additional B-17s to come off the assembly lines.²⁶

On 23 October 1942, the 305th's bombers took off on their dangerous journey across the Atlantic. There were several mishaps en route. Engine problems and foul weather conspired to cause one crew to ditch off the Nova Scotia coast. Another B-17 was damaged when its pilot ran off the side of the runway during takeoff following an intermediate stop in Gander, Nova Scotia.²⁷ In the end, all 35 of the

²² Coffey, *Iron Eagle*, 19-20.

²³ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 217.

²⁴ Coffey, *Iron Eagle*, 18.

²⁵ "8th Air Force Historical Section Interview with Colonel Curtis LeMay," 7 September 1943, page 5, Box B39, Curtis E. LeMay Papers, 1918-1969, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Hereafter cited as "LeMay Papers."

²⁶ Coffey, *Iron Eagle*, 22.

²⁷ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 228.

305th's crews, and most of their original aircraft, eventually arrived safely at Prestwick, Scotland.²⁸ LeMay's men had passed their first test.

The First Taste of Combat

In Scotland, LeMay crossed paths with Colonel Frank Armstrong. Armstrong had the one thing all members of the 305th—including LeMay—lacked. After 10 months in Europe, serving as General Eaker's operations officer at Eighth Bomber Command and later commanding the 97th Bomb Group, he was returning to the United States. Armstrong had several combat sorties under his belt, not the least of which was the first American B-17 strike against German targets.²⁹ When LeMay pressed the veteran for advice, Armstrong offered two observations about wartime bombing. First, the flak was "really terrific." Second, "if you fly straight and level for as much as ten seconds, the enemy are [sic] bound to shoot you down."³⁰ To the green aviators of the 305th Bomb Group, Armstrong's words were gospel.

LeMay did not doubt Armstrong's description of German flak, but he immediately recognized a problem with the prescribed action. After years of experience, including time huddled over the Norden bombsight, LeMay knew even the most skilled bombardier in a benign environment had little chance of delivering accurate weapons on a bomb run lasting a mere 10 seconds.³¹ Given that, how could an average crew under combat stress expect to hit a target?

After a little detective work, LeMay had his answer. He checked all the existing post strike photographs of targets to see just what kind of damage the B-17s were achieving. LeMay tediously plotted all the bomb assessments he could find. He was stunned. LeMay recalled in his

²⁸ Kozak, *LeMay*, 89-90.

²⁹ Coffey, *Iron Eagle*, 29.

³⁰ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 230.

³¹ General Curtis E. LeMay, interview by Dr. Edgar F. Puryear, Jr., 17 November 1976, transcript, page 80, K239.0512-1450, US Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, AL. Hereafter cited as "LeMay interview by Puryear."

memoirs, “These people didn’t know where half of their bombs fell. And most of the bombs didn’t hit the target anyway.”³² Once again, LeMay faced a seemingly unwinnable predicament. If he allowed his aircraft to maneuver continuously to their targets, they would rarely destroy anything. If he forced them to approach the target straight and level, the German defenses would have a field day. It was time for LeMay’s hallmark: more hard work.

However, LeMay could not devote all his time to the question of bomb run maneuvers. He had a group filled with aircrews that had never flown in a large bomber formation, and had only a few days to prepare them for their first combat missions. Lacking any escort, Eighth Bomber Command leaders believed the bombers’ only hope for survival against Luftwaffe fighters was to remain in a tight formation, which concentrated the deterrent effect of the Fortresses’ 50-caliber guns. The first time weather permitted, LeMay launched his group on a training mission and attempted to form them up. He recalled, “you never saw such a lousy assemblage of B-17s in your life.”³³ There were many mistakes that day, and LeMay realized one of the first had been his own. Flying as lead pilot prevented him from observing most of what was going on behind him. He did not make that mistake again.

For the next training flight, LeMay was again in the lead bomber, but this time watching from the top turret. From such a position, he could see the formation come together and order adjustments accordingly. It was an experience LeMay’s radio operator that day, Mike Kruge, never forgot. LeMay choreographed the entire operation, barking, “Number six further to port...Number eleven raise yourself above number fourteen.”³⁴ Through this iterative process, LeMay developed his ideal aerial structure: the combat box formation. The combat box featured 18

³² LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 231.

³³ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 232.

³⁴ Kozak, *LeMay*, 99.

to 21 bombers arranged in a three-tiered stagger. Each altitude stagger, normally assigned to a discreet squadron, had the option of maneuvering independently. The three dimensional organization effectively concentrated the B-17's machine gun defenses.³⁵

LeMay's group had two practice missions in mid-November. Both were diversions for other activities and the B-17s carried no bombs. The Germans, however, provided a requisite amount of flak over the French coast. On these missions, LeMay again spent time in the top turret of the lead bomber, pointing out any B-17 that drifted out of position.³⁶ He was satisfied his crews, now capable of holding tight formation, were ready to face the German fighters, but he still had not cracked the problem of the German flak and maneuvers on the bomb run.

The night after the second practice mission, LeMay could not sleep. All the groups in Europe had been using evasive action on their bomb runs, and none of them had been bombing accurately. Something had to change. LeMay decided he had to reevaluate Frank Armstrong's description of the lethality of German flak. In a stroke of fortune, he found a way to do it. For a reason unknown even to LeMay, he had tossed an old ROTC field artillery manual into his foot locker. LeMay dug out the manual and opened it to the section on the French 75-millimeter gun. Admittedly, .75s differed from the German's 88-millimeter flak cannon, but it was close enough for him to interpolate. LeMay wanted to know how many rounds a German gun needed to fire to hit a B-17 sized target reliably. The tables told him the number was 372.³⁷ LeMay thought those were pretty good odds. Good enough, in fact, to risk his own life and the lives of the crewmembers of the 305th Bomb Group on their first combat mission. They flew straight and level to the target.

³⁵ Barrett Tillman, *LeMay* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 28-29.

³⁶ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 236.

³⁷ Coffey, *Iron Eagle*, 34-35.

On the morning of 23 November 1942, LeMay briefed his crews. The first target for the 305th was the submarine pens at St. Nazaire. Eighth Bomber Command had targeted St. Nazaire four previous times without success. LeMay wanted this time to be different. There was some grumbling when LeMay informed the crews they were not to maneuver during the bomb run. It was understandable. LeMay himself had doubts, recalling, "It seemed a brash thing to decide, especially to have such a decision made by a guy who had never been over a target."³⁸ LeMay told the crews he planned to fly the lead aircraft to guide the formation straight and level to put bombs on target. Similar to being on point with a platoon on patrol, flying the lead aircraft offered comparable danger, as the Germans typically focused their counterattacks on the lead aircraft.³⁹ With the knowledge that Old Iron Ass was going to be in front, the grumbling ceased.

The St. Nazaire mission's results spoke for themselves. Despite a seven-minute, straight and level run in to the target, flak failed to down a single B-17. Two bombers were lost to fighters. The 305th put twice as many bombs on target as any other group that day.⁴⁰ LeMay was ecstatic. The mission report from the strike carried one recommendation for the rest of Eighth Bomber Command: employ in combat formations of not less than six aircraft.⁴¹ That recommendation, coupled with the 305th's continued good results, was enough to convince the other units. Within three weeks, every group in the theater limited maneuvers during the bomb runs; soon thereafter, senior commanders mandated units to adopt the combat box formation as standard procedure.⁴²

³⁸ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 241.

³⁹ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 242.

⁴⁰ Coffey, *Iron Eagle*, 38.

⁴¹ "Narrative Report of the 305th Bombardment Group (H) AAF, St. Nazaire, 23 November 1942," 25 November 1942, Box B2, LeMay Papers.

⁴² Coffey, *Iron Eagle*, 38.

LeMay now knew he had made sound choices in aggressively training his men both at Muroc and in Europe. After his retirement, LeMay recalled, “They thought I was driving them to death [at Muroc] and when they got over there they realized what was happening and the reason for it. I think then they were thankful that I had beat them a little bit to get more out of them during their training period. I think that gave them confidence, a little confidence in me.”⁴³

Success Breeds Success

LeMay was not one to rest on his laurels. He recognized that his two important tactical innovations would ultimately go to waste if he could not further improve the B-17’s accuracy. To this end, LeMay and his 305th Bomb Group developed two institutions that LeMay modeled and returned to the rest of his career.

LeMay believed every mission presented an opportunity to learn and he wanted to “wring the greatest possible benefit” from each lesson.⁴⁴ After that first combat mission against St. Nazaire, he implemented a formal process to ensure that learning took place. Post mission critiques had value only if they were frank and honest, so only those that flew on that particular mission were welcome. Further, LeMay made it clear that anything said in the room was to remain there.⁴⁵ LeMay opened himself up as an object for critical analysis as well, encouraging the men to critique his command.⁴⁶ After all the crewmembers stated opinions and advocated solutions to problems, LeMay closed the meetings. The good ideas received official endorsement, the bad ones ignored, and those that required further elucidation were identified as such.⁴⁷ The formal post mission debriefs instituted at the 305th later became standard in every flying organization

⁴³ LeMay interview by Puryear, 116-17.

⁴⁴ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 313.

⁴⁵ LeMay interview by Puryear, 117.

⁴⁶ Coffey, *Iron Eagle*, 48.

⁴⁷ Coffey, *Iron Eagle*, 49.

LeMay commanded. They remain so in virtually all Western military flying organizations today.

The formal debriefs did not, however, solve the fundamental problem of inaccurate navigation and bombardment that plagued the 305th's young crews. It was nearly impossible for the crews to prepare in advance for a specific combat sortie. From mission to mission, the group had little insight into the location of their upcoming targets. Often the bombardiers and navigators only had a few short minutes to pour over a target folder between the mission briefing and reporting to their aircraft. LeMay recalled it was as if they were trying to cram for a college final in only a few minutes.⁴⁸

LeMay realized he needed crews that knew “their target areas as well as they know their own backyards.”⁴⁹ It would be impossible for each crew to learn all of Europe to such an extent, but each crew could study a smaller portion of enemy territory. LeMay immediately selected the most likely locations for targets. He then assigned each potential target area to a specific crew. Now when a target popped up there were at least one or two navigators and bombardiers who were intimately familiar with the area and able to lead the rest of the group to the target.⁵⁰

Being a member of a lead crew was not for everyone. It required outstanding ability, long hours of dedicated study, and promised flying all the tough missions. However, the results of the lead crew program were undeniable. The 305th consistently scored more hits on targets than any other B-17 group. Consequently, in July 1943 General Eaker mandated the lead crew program for all Eighth Bomber Command groups.⁵¹ Similar to the post-mission debrief, the lead crew concept

⁴⁸ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 256.

⁴⁹ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 256.

⁵⁰ Coffey, *Iron Eagle*, 50-51.

⁵¹ Tillman, *LeMay*, 32.

followed LeMay from Europe to the Pacific and later became an establishment in SAC.

Robert Olds, now a major general, monitored LeMay's mounting successes in Europe. In May 1942, Olds took responsibility for the building and stateside training of new bomber groups. His unique relationship with LeMay again proved mutually fortuitous. Olds mandated the training requirements for new crewmembers reporting to the European theater. His relationship with LeMay allowed him to go straight to the source for details on type and quantity of required training. LeMay saw the benefit personally, as better-trained crewmembers began arriving at the 305th Bomb Group.

In January 1943, LeMay sent Olds a personal letter detailing the precise deficiencies of the new crewmembers arriving from training in the United States. LeMay singled out formation flying for pilots, dead reckoning and pilotage for navigators, bombing in reduced visibility, and gunnery in general as areas needing significant improvement.⁵² In February, Olds responded, calling LeMay's inputs "invaluable" to the Second Air Force Operational Training Unit and promised to "send over additional units up to the standard you have set."⁵³ It is remarkable that this dialogue, with its incredibly important consequences for the European theater writ large, occurred in purely personal correspondence rather than ciphered cables and telegrams.

Unfortunately, this extraordinary relationship was nearing its end. Olds succumbed to complications from heart disease in late April 1943.⁵⁴ When Olds passed away, LeMay lost one of his most trusted advisors and staunchest advocates. However, another important relationship was maturing. LeMay's rapport with Olds had grown from a string of the

⁵² Colonel Curtis LeMay to Major General Robert Olds, 12 January 1943, Box B1, LeMay Papers.

⁵³ Major General Robert Olds to Colonel Curtis LeMay, 24 February 1943, Box B1, LeMay Papers.

⁵⁴ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 276.

former's successes. His most recent run of accomplishments caught the eye of General Ira Eaker.

Indeed, Eaker, still running Eighth Bomber Command, was acutely aware of his successful group commander's acumen. As the bomber effort in the theater expanded, Eaker rapidly advanced his most prodigious combat leader. In June 1943, LeMay assumed command of the 102nd Provisional Combat Wing. He was only there a few weeks before Eaker sent him to command the Fourth Combat Wing, which was soon redesignated the Third Air Division.⁵⁵ Even considering the wartime promotion rate, LeMay's meteoric rise was unusual. Though he remained a colonel until September 1943, division command was a general officer's job. He found himself in charge of many people who had previously outranked him. Included in that group was LeMay's second squadron commander, whom was now one of the group commanders under *his* command.⁵⁶ Despite his lingering uneasiness, LeMay displayed the same leadership and implemented the same programs that had proven successful in the 305th Bomb Group.

The historic Regensburg mission marked the high water mark for LeMay and Eaker's cooperation in Europe. The mission was to be part of a combined strike, with Schweinfurt as the other target. The plan called for LeMay and the Third Air Division to strike aircraft production facilities at Regensburg and then continue to a recovery field in Tunisia. The B-17s planned to traverse more than 500 miles of fortified German territory on their 1600-mile journey from England to North Africa.⁵⁷

The First Air Division, trailing by a few minutes in an attempt to avoid the Luftwaffe, was to attack ball bearing plants at Schweinfurt and recover in England. In theory, LeMay's force was to face the tough

⁵⁵ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 284-85.

⁵⁶ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 286.

⁵⁷ "Brigadier General Curtis E. LeMay as Bombardment Group Commanding Officer, 1942-1943," 3rd Bombardment Group History, June 1944, page 4, Box B39, LeMay Papers.

opposition on the ingress, but expected an uncontested departure into North Africa. The Third Air Division, meanwhile, was to have an easier ingress—while the German fighters focused on LeMay and company—but anticipated stiff opposition on its return flight across enemy territory.⁵⁸

Not only was the plan complicated, but it also required good weather in England and Germany. On 17 August 1943, in barely acceptable weather conditions, the Third Air Division launched for the attack. Immediately things began to go wrong. The entire First Air Division, those slated to strike Schweinfurt, was stuck on the ground due to low ceilings. LeMay pressed on. In his memoirs, he recalls that the Germans “threw everything against us” that day.⁵⁹ German fighters and ground defenses destroyed 24 of LeMay’s 127 B-17s. Once they got airborne, the First Air Division suffered even greater losses, losing 36 bombers.⁶⁰ As if that was not enough, when LeMay’s bombers finally limped into their recovery base in North Africa, the Army was gone. The war had moved on to Sicily, taking the bombers’ recovery support with it.⁶¹

It took more than a week to get the salvageable aircraft and crews back to their bases in England. On 24 August, 57 of the returning B-17s, including LeMay’s, attacked a target in France. The best estimates are that half of the B-17s launched against Regensburg never flew another mission.⁶² According to his aide’s entry in his daily diary, LeMay deplaned his B-17 at approximately 1900 hours, looking like the majority of the aviators: “tired, hungry, dirty, but very glad to be back in England.”⁶³

⁵⁸ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 289.

⁵⁹ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 288.

⁶⁰ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 293.

⁶¹ Coffey, *Iron Eagle*, 89.

⁶² Coffey, *Iron Eagle*, 91-92.

⁶³ “Resume of Events while Aide de Camp to Major General Curtis E. LeMay, 25 June 1943-26 June 1944,” entry dated 24 August 1943, Box B7, LeMay Papers.

Despite the losses, Eaker was pleased with LeMay's performance. Eaker's initial report—one surely read by General Hap Arnold, commanding general of the Army Air Forces, back in Washington—concluded, "LeMay deserves highest praise for mission."⁶⁴ Only six years earlier, during the planning for the first B-17 mission to South America, Olds had advocated LeMay's prowess to Eaker. Now Eaker was the advocate, and his audience was the chief of the Army Air Forces.

Arnold himself visited Eighth Air Force headquarters the following week. LeMay earned a private meeting with the icon, during which Arnold discussed a myriad of issues, including the troubled B-29 program. Though LeMay had no way of knowing it at the time, one purpose of the meeting was undoubtedly a veiled job interview. Arnold knew he needed the best leaders in the Army Air Forces to salvage his plan for the Superfortresses in the Pacific.⁶⁵

LeMay continued a very successful tour as the Third Air Division commander until his reassignment to the Pacific Theater in June 1944.⁶⁶ However, his formative experiences as a wartime commander were largely complete when Arnold left his office that day. LeMay's memoirs describe the importance of the period from 1941 through 1944 in one world: experience. "All that time I was doing my best to learn how to be a commander."⁶⁷

Learn he did. LeMay had built a venerable combat unit from a handful of undertrained aviators and three B-17s. He single-handedly debunked the myth of the lethality of German flak. His development of the combat box formation and decision to limit maneuvering on bomb runs were two of the most important innovations in the entire European

⁶⁴ General Ira Eaker to 4th Wing Headquarters, 18 August 1943, telegram, Box B1, LeMay Papers.

⁶⁵ Coffey, *Iron Eagle*, 96-97.

⁶⁶ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 310.

⁶⁷ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 310.

bombing campaign.⁶⁸ His relationship with Robert Olds had served him well. Now, Ira Eaker was his primary advocate and the name “LeMay” was prominent in the mind of General Arnold. In four years, LeMay advanced from lieutenant to major general and parlayed a reputation as a good navigator and a hard worker into recognition as the premier problem solver in the Army Air Forces.⁶⁹

Had LeMay done nothing else, his legacy would have suffered little. However, LeMay’s most notable service was yet to come. His tenure as a senior leader in the Pacific theater clearly reflected the formative experiences of his childhood, his early military career, and his time as a combat leader in Europe.



⁶⁸ Tillman, *LeMay*, 39.

⁶⁹ Kozak, *LeMay*, 165.

Chapter 4

Pacific Transformation

Earlier we were getting it from Arnold—before Curt showed up in the Pacific—because we weren't doing much then. The results were not very encouraging.

General David A. Burchinal, XXI Bomber Command B-29 pilot

When General LeMay arrived, from a crew point of view, there was a very substantial change...we really put our nose to the stone in terms of training, doctrine, and air discipline.

General Jack J. Catton, XXI Bomber Command B-29 pilot

LeMay left Europe and his beloved B-17s holding a remarkable record of success. Each time LeMay conquered a wartime challenge, his solution merited boilerplating as a theater standard. The most senior leaders in the Army Air Forces knew LeMay by name. General Arnold, the highest-ranking aviator of them all, was no exception. Arnold faced an incredibly difficult problem in improving B-29 operations in the Pacific. He knew the future of an independent Air Force likely hinged on the performance of his strategic bombers in the Pacific. If any officer could turn around the maligned operation, Arnold knew it was LeMay.

LeMay, who ultimately spent less than a year in the Pacific theater, emerged from the Pacific experience as a transformed leader. As he led the B-29 operations, LeMay called upon the lessons of his past. Successful results validated those lessons, simultaneously reinforcing character traits forged by previous formative experiences. He left England in 1944 as a great combat air commander, shrewd tactician, and master innovator. He left the Pacific in September 1945 as a recognized leader of the Army Air Forces, a staunch advocate of strategic bombing's efficacy, and a master air strategist.

Why Send LeMay?

In the spring of 1944, the B-29 program was struggling. Its problems spanned from production delays in the United States, to mechanical problems in flight, to logistical shortfalls in the Pacific theater.¹ Arnold's omnipresent stewardship of the B-29—the crown jewel of the Army Air Forces—was the only thing holding the program together. Further, he realized the future of an independent Air Force hinged on his bomber's performance and loathed the prospect of transferring control of the behemoths to theater commanders. In a critical power grab, Arnold successfully petitioned the Joint Chiefs of Staff to keep the B-29s centrally controlled from Washington.² This command arrangement placed sole responsibility for the bombers' success on Arnold's shoulders.

The chain of command ran from the Joint Chiefs through Arnold, the de facto leader of Twentieth Air Force, down to the XX Bomber Command in the China-Burma-India (CBI) theater and XXI Bomber Command in the Mariana islands.³ LeMay described it as "General Arnold's dream of a Strategic Air Force come true."⁴ However, the spring's poor results in the CBI theater threatened to turn that dream into a nightmare. On 15 June 1944, XX Bomber Command finally mustered a strike against the Japanese mainland with unimpressive results. When Brigadier General Kenneth B. Wolfe, the XX's commander, failed to produce timely follow-on strikes, Arnold had seen enough.⁵

Arnold faced a big problem. LeMay, widely regarded as the top problem solver in the Army Air Forces, seemed like the perfect fit. However, it was not by accident that LeMay came to be Arnold's choice.

¹ Thomas M. Coffey, *Iron Eagle: The Turbulent Life of General Curtis LeMay*, 1st ed. (New York: Crown Publishers, 1986), 109-11.

² Bernard C. Nalty, *Winged Shield, Winged Sword: A History of the United States Air Force* (Washington D.C.: Air Force History and Museums Program, 1997), 342.

³ Nalty, *Winged Shield, Winged Sword*, 342.

⁴ Curtis E. LeMay and MacKinlay Kantor, *Mission with LeMay: My Story*, 1st ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965), 328.

⁵ Nalty, *Winged Shield, Winged Sword*, 343.

Rather, it was the effect of an important formative relationship in LeMay's career. For nearly two years, General Eaker touted LeMay's wartime accolades. It is not too much to say that without Eaker's sponsorship, LeMay might have remained in Europe. Ultimately, Eaker did recommend LeMay to Arnold for the job.⁶ Nonetheless, Eaker's persistent praise over a period of years, rather than his final endorsement, likely carried more weight in Arnold's decision. For his part, LeMay knew that when Arnold selected him, Eaker had his "fingers in the pie."⁷

The China-Burma-India Theater

Arnold had little time to spare in righting his listing ship. He directed LeMay to report to India immediately. LeMay countered that he had to learn to fly the B-29 before he could effectively lead men flying it in combat.⁸ Technical competency was a cornerstone of LeMay's leadership in the B-17, and he refused to compromise on the issue when it came to the B-29. It proved to be a wise decision. During his short qualification, LeMay quickly discovered why B-29 operations were so difficult. The plane had numerous mechanical problems, most notably the propensity for its engines to overheat and catch on fire. LeMay recalled in his memoirs, "The B-29 wasn't ready for combat, not by any means."⁹

LeMay qualified on the new aircraft and learned as much as he could about its idiosyncrasies. Upon arriving in the CBI theater, LeMay realized the B-29's mechanical shortfalls were not his biggest problem. The theater itself was a logistical nightmare. The main B-29 bases were in India. However, due to range limitations, all strikes against Japanese

⁶ Coffey, *Iron Eagle*, 107.

⁷ General Curtis E. LeMay, interview by Dr. Edgar F. Puryear, Jr., 17 November 1976, transcript, page 95, K239.0512-1450, US Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, AL.

⁸ Warren Kozak, *LeMay: The Life and Wars of General Curtis LeMay* (Washington, D.C.: Regenery Pub., 2009), 170.

⁹ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 322-23.

targets originated from forward bases in China. The only way to deliver ammunition, aircraft parts, fuel, and other supplies to these forward bases was with the B-29s themselves. The trip between the main and forward bases was 1,300 miles each way and crossed the highest mountains in the world. The aircrews called the missions “going over the Hump.” It took seven flights across the Himalayas just to provide enough supplies for one combat sortie against Japan.¹⁰

Despite the challenges, LeMay had no time to waste, as Arnold expected quick results and LeMay did not want to disappoint. LeMay set up training programs for his ground personnel and aircrews. Building on his previous experience, he changed the command’s standard combat formation to one similar to that used in Europe. Further, he directed that each group identify and train six “lead crews.”¹¹ Only 10 days after arriving in theater, LeMay was ready to lead XX Bomber Command on a combat mission.

Arnold, however, was not ready to risk his star commander’s life. LeMay, not surprisingly, was furious. His command philosophy dictated that he lead his men into combat. Any other permutation, in LeMay’s mind, was flat-out wrong. Further, LeMay felt the only way to understand the unique challenge of combat in the Pacific theater was to experience it firsthand. LeMay made his case to fly. Arnold compromised and granted LeMay one mission.¹² LeMay, predictably, decided to spend that mission at the controls of the lead B-29 on his new command’s first combat strike.

On 8 September 1944, LeMay got his first taste of combat against the Japanese. He led more than 100 B-29s against coke ovens in Anshan, Manchuria.¹³ The raid proved largely successful. The B-29s

¹⁰ Coffey, *Iron Eagle*, 112-13.

¹¹ Coffey, *Iron Eagle*, 113.

¹² Kozak, *LeMay*, 184-85.

¹³ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 329-30.

destroyed or severely damaged six coke ovens at a cost of only four bombers. LeMay learned two things from the Ashan raid. First, the Japanese fighters were ineffective against the high-altitude, high-speed B-29s. Second, the crews of XX Bomber Command were not particularly good.¹⁴

LeMay immediately set to work on his crews' proficiency. To start with, he cancelled all scheduled combat missions. For two weeks, XX Bomber Command flew training missions, focusing on rapid assembly, tightening formations, fuel conservation, and mountain flying. LeMay also streamlined logistics and increased the bomb loads on combat sorties. On 26 September, XX Bomber Command resumed combat operations.¹⁵

The hard work produced immediate dividends. Throughout the fall, LeMay and Arnold engaged in a mutually reinforcing dialog centered on combat performance. On 17 November, Arnold wrote, "The progress you have been making in adding to your bomb load is most gratifying...I have seen your bomb strike photos...and I have proudly displayed them whenever opportunity arose. The fine work your people have been doing is providing a standard for the other B-29 units."¹⁶ LeMay replied on 29 November. "I have always known the value of training, but I have never before had the opportunity of taking an outfit in combat and comparing their efficiency before and after inaugurating a training program...We are now ten times more efficient than we were in August...The entire Command was very pleased to receive your expression of satisfaction in our work."¹⁷

¹⁴ Coffey, *Iron Eagle*, 114-15.

¹⁵ Coffey, *Iron Eagle*, 119-20.

¹⁶ Coffey, *Iron Eagle*, 123-24.

¹⁷ Major General Curtis LeMay to General Henry Arnold, 29 November, 1944, Box B11, Curtis E. LeMay Papers, 1918-1969, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Hereafter cited as "LeMay Papers."

Despite the logistical challenges he faced, LeMay outpaced all other overseas bomber operations. Whereas typical commands flew roughly 80 hours per aircraft per month, LeMay's unit averaged 92.¹⁸ While LeMay excelled, his counterpart in the Marianas floundered. Brigadier General Haywood S. Hansell, had commanded XXI Bomber Command from its inception. Where LeMay's B-29s had to overcome logistical challenges, Hansell's faced troubling weather. Japan featured a persistent overcast layer, which greatly diminished the accuracy of visual bombing. The high winds at altitude over Japan were even more troubling, wreaking havoc on the B-29's bombing accuracy. Historian Bernard C. Nalty described this jet stream as an "unsolvable problem" for the B-29s, affecting the speed and drift of the aircraft and dispersing its bomb load.¹⁹ No matter what they tried, Hansell's crews repeatedly failed to deliver accurate bombs.

In January 1945, Arnold made a change. He removed Hansell from command, named LeMay as his successor at XXI Bomber Command, and directed the gradual cessation of B-29 operations in the CBI theater.²⁰ For the second time in six months, Arnold asked LeMay to resolve an intractable problem.

The View from Guam

LeMay took command of XXI Bomber Command on 19 January 1945.²¹ Despite holding a similar title and the same rank, LeMay's new assignment was anything but a lateral move. Given the rapidly diminishing role of the bombers based in China, he now controlled the Pacific theater's strategic air assets. With Arnold half a world away, LeMay enjoyed the freedom to act autonomously. However, Arnold's

¹⁸ Richard B. Frank, *Downfall: The End of the Imperial Japanese Empire* (New York: Random House, 1999), 57. Then Lieutenant Colonel (later Secretary of Defense) Robert S. McNamara authored the efficiency report cited by Frank.

¹⁹ Nalty, *Winged Shield, Winged Sword*, 350.

²⁰ Barrett Tillman, *LeMay* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 51.

²¹ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 340.

unyielding drive for results weighed heavily upon LeMay. In his memoirs, LeMay recalled his orders from Arnold: “You go ahead and get results with the B-29. If you don’t get results, you’ll be fired. If you don’t get results, also, there’ll never be any Strategic Air Forces of the Pacific... If you don’t get results it will mean eventually a mass amphibious invasion of Japan, to cost probably half a million more American lives.”²² Great responsibility accompanied the authority bestowed upon LeMay.

LeMay got to work. Following the recipe for success that had served him so well in Europe and the CBI theater, he surveyed his aircrews, as well as Guam’s maintenance and supply systems.²³ For weeks, he streamlined processes and pushed his people for improvement. General Jack Catton, then a XXI Bomber Command B-29 pilot, recalled his firsthand observations of LeMay’s arrival on the command. “For a week or two we didn’t fly combat; we flew training missions around the Marianas.” Catton continued, “we had achieved some success before General LeMay got there, but after General LeMay arrived, we really put our nose to the stone in terms of training, doctrine, and *air discipline* [emphasis in original].”²⁴

LeMay’s extensive efforts to train his crews and bolster his maintenance capacity seemed to be bearing fruit. His crews soon matched the accuracy LeMay saw in Europe.²⁵ Further, LeMay directed intense training on the B-29 radar set. Soon even the least-skilled operators could navigate using land-water contrast, giving the B-29s rudimentary all weather capability.²⁶ In terms of generating combat sorties, the numbers were impressive. Each of XXI Bomber Command’s

²² LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 347.

²³ Coffey, *Iron Eagle*, 137.

²⁴ Richard H. Kohn and Joseph P. Harahan, *Strategic Air Warfare: An Interview with Generals Curtis E. LeMay, Leon W. Johnson, David A. Burchinal, and Jack J. Catton*, Office of US Air Force History (Washington D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1988), 62.

²⁵ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 343.

²⁶ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 345.

B-29s could fly up to 120 hours per month, compared with a paltry 30 hours per month flown by the B-17s in Europe.²⁷ Yet, the only metric that really mattered to LeMay—target destruction—was not improving rapidly enough. The jet stream remained a problem.

Years later, LeMay described how these very high winds affected a B-29 bomb run, saying, “You could go on forever, trying to get up to a target in such a wind. And if you went cross-wind, your bombsight wouldn’t take care of the drift you had. If you came in downwind, you didn’t have time to get a proper run on the target.”²⁸ Of all the challenges he had faced in World War II, Mother Nature was proving to be the most vexing.

Culmination: The Decision to Firebomb Tokyo

As LeMay wrestled with the problem of accurate bombing over Japan, he surely recalled his most important experiences. In the toughest circumstances, LeMay’s solutions were not only effective, but also often unorthodox. He had gotten through the Ohio State curriculum by working a late night job, and then repeatedly sleeping through one class so he could concentrate in others. He resigned his reserve commission in the Army and joined the National Guard to better his chances for selection into the Air Corps. He then audaciously sent a telegram to Washington to expedite his application. Years later, he had been right about not maneuvering during bomb runs. In that instance, LeMay’s unorthodox approach became the standard for the theater. This propensity for uncovering unorthodox solutions, a trait Hansell failed to display, ultimately allowed LeMay to solve the problem of the jet stream over Japan.²⁹

²⁷ Kohn and Harahan, *Strategic Air Warfare*, 58.

²⁸ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 342-43.

²⁹ Barrett Tillman, *Whirlwind: The Air War Against Japan, 1942-1945* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 104-05.

LeMay dissected the problem. The strong jet stream meant high altitude bombing was not an option. The B-29s could go lower, but lower altitudes meant increased vulnerability to flak and fighters. The capability of Japan's low altitude flak was largely unknown, but there was no data suggesting it was prohibitive. The fighters, however, were another story. They were quite formidable during the day. If the B-29s attacked at night, the same darkness that protected them from fighters prevented them from visually bombing their targets.³⁰

LeMay's solution required three separate departures from standard B-29 procedures. First, results from previous strikes on Japanese urban centers convinced LeMay that incendiary weapons, rather than high explosives, were more effective. High explosive bombs had a finite blast radius, but incendiaries had the potential to burn much larger areas. The wood-based construction of Japanese buildings enhanced this effect. Second, and related to the first, LeMay realized that accuracy was not as important with incendiaries. If darkness or poor weather conditions prevented visual bombing, B-29s could drop their weapons based on information from their radar sets. Finally, the key to the tactic was concentrating incendiaries in a small area to ignite an intense blaze. The natural spread of the combustion, rather than the initial inferno, was to cause the majority of the damage. Low-altitude deliveries maximized the concentration of the incendiary weapons.

LeMay directed his wing commanders to prepare for low-altitude, night, incendiary raids against Japanese urban centers. The order directly contradicted the day's air doctrine, which advocated "high altitude precision daylight bombing."³¹ The fact that the Air Corps developed the B-29 specifically for high-altitude bombing only magnified the irony.

³⁰ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 345-52. In these pages of his memoir, LeMay describes how he viewed the B-29's complex accuracy problem and suggests how previous experiences helped him decide to switch to low altitude incendiary tactics.

³¹ Tillman, *Whirlwind*, 135.

Outside of his wing commanders, LeMay kept his plan to himself. In an effort to protect Arnold, who at the time was recovering from yet another heart attack, LeMay did not inform his superior of the upcoming change in tactics. The order was his alone.³² LeMay scheduled the attack—one which changed the face of war in the Pacific—for the night of 9 March 1945. His career hung on the mission's outcome.³³

This time LeMay had to remain on the ground. Though he did not know the details of the Manhattan Project, he knew it existed. That limited atomic knowledge was enough to end LeMay's combat flying; American military leaders could not risk anyone with knowledge of the atomic program falling into enemy custody. Unable to lead the mission himself, LeMay selected his most competent wing commander, General Thomas Power. During the preflight briefing, crewmembers expressed disbelief, surprise, and concern when told they were to bomb from as low as 5,000 feet.³⁴ LeMay expected their reaction. It was the same reaction he heard when he briefed the first non-maneuvering B-17 bomb run on the St. Nazaire mission in November 1943.

LeMay went to the flightline and watched his bombers take off. Power was to lead the formation of over 300 B-29s, imitate the attack, and then remain overhead the target to document the fire's progression. LeMay, whom had desperately wanted to lead the mission himself, now felt apprehension and doubt. Unable to sleep, he spent the night in the operations control room, awaiting the coded "bombs away" messages from his B-29s.³⁵ The first message arrived: "Bombing the primary target visually. Large fires observed. Flak moderate. Fighter opposition nil."³⁶

³² LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 355.

³³ Tillman, *LeMay*, 60.

³⁴ Coffey, *Iron Eagle*, 157-62.

³⁵ Coffey, *Iron Eagle*, 162-63.

³⁶ Coffey, *Iron Eagle*, 164.

The ensuing firestorm devastated Tokyo. It left more than 83,000 people dead, 40,000 injured, and more than one million homeless.³⁷ The attack shattered Japan's steel and petroleum industries and destroyed countless small factories nestled within Tokyo's residential neighborhoods. The omnipotent fire destroyed 16 square miles in three hours.³⁸ LeMay lost just 14 bombers; for that small cost, he validated a strategy to destroy what remained of Japan's cottage war industry.³⁹

The Smoke Clears

During the next 10 days, LeMay repeated the process, systematically burning Japan's most important cities to the ground. By 19 March, LeMay had targeted Osaka, Kobe, and Nagoya twice. Each mission featured nearly 300 B-29s.⁴⁰ Then, XXI Bomber Command ran out of incendiary bombs. The Navy, charged with supplying ordnance to the B-29 fleet, simply could not believe the bombers had dropped their entire supply of napalm in only 10 days.⁴¹

Japan's respite was short. Within a few weeks, the Navy delivered more incendiaries to XXI Bomber Command. LeMay relentlessly attacked population and industry centers. By the middle of June, the cumulative effect was difficult to comprehend. In Tokyo, B-29 raids burned 56.3 square miles; in Osaka, 15.6 square miles; in Nagoya, 12.4 square miles; in Yokohama, 8.9 square miles; in Kobe, 8.8 square miles; and in Kawasaki, 3.6 square miles.⁴²

On 15 June 1945, Arnold visited LeMay on Guam. After LeMay presented a summary of operations to his superior, Arnold only asked one question. He wanted to know when LeMay expected an end to the war. Much later, LeMay recalled that conversation: "If he hadn't been

³⁷ Nalty, *Winged Shield, Winged Sword*, 358.

³⁸ Tillman, *Whirlwind*, 153.

³⁹ Coffey, *Iron Eagle*, 165.

⁴⁰ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 354.

⁴¹ Kozak, *LeMay*, 237.

⁴² Coffey, *Iron Eagle*, 172.

convinced before, I think he was convinced then that we could do the job, because he asked me when the war was going to end. I said, 'Well, we have been so busy fighting it I haven't figured out a date. We are trying to end it before the invasion. Give me thirty minutes, and I will give you a date.' I got [my planners] to take a look and see how many more industrial areas we had to hit and how long it was going to take us. They came back in about twenty minutes, and we gave Arnold a date in September sometime. He said immediately, 'You will go back to brief the Joint Chiefs.'"⁴³

LeMay followed Arnold's order, pulling a B-29 from the flightline for the trip to Washington. Upon his arrival, LeMay received a lukewarm reception. He recalled Army chief of staff General George C. Marshall actually fell asleep during the briefing. Given the results of the war in Europe, selling conventional strategic air action as a substitute for invasion was a difficult prospect. However, the trip was not without benefit. LeMay received a detailed explanation of the planned atomic bomb delivery from General Leslie R. Groves, the leader of the Manhattan Project. While he did not understand all the technical details, he knew Japanese air defenses as well as any man in the world. LeMay made several suggestions, including forgoing a large formation: "A single bomber would look just like another reconnaissance flight...unlikely to meet any fighter resistance whatsoever."⁴⁴ It is fitting that when it came to planning the most important bomber mission in history, LeMay, the one man who influenced bomber employment more than any other, "had his fingers in the pie."

Aftermath

LeMay's time in command of XXI Bomber Command was ending. In July 1945, General Spaatz arrived on Guam to take command of all

⁴³ Kohn and Harahan, *Strategic Air Warfare*, 64.

⁴⁴ L. Douglas Keeney, *15 Minutes: General Curtis LeMay and the Countdown to Nuclear Annihilation*, 1st ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2011), 15.

Pacific bomber operations, which now included a glut of bombers arriving from Europe. LeMay stayed on as his chief of staff. Despite losing the job of B-29 commander on paper, there is no doubt LeMay's opinion still carried great weight within the B-29 command throughout the remainder of the war.⁴⁵

Few could find fault with LeMay's performance in the Pacific. In a 1968 letter, General Hansell, the man LeMay replaced at XXI Bomber Command, detailed the significance of LeMay's personal decision to switch tactics: "I particularly endorse the credit given to General LeMay for a fine and courageous decision to turn to low-level night operations on the later attacks on urban industrial areas... It was a personal decision, not a consensus, and he alone should bear the credit."⁴⁶ Lieutenant General James V. Edmundson, later a director of operations under LeMay at SAC, concluded, "I think if LeMay or somebody like him—and there isn't anybody else like him—hadn't been running the B-29 program, we probably would have had to make a ground invasion of Japan."⁴⁷

General Spaatz offered an equally glowing endorsement. After completing his initial inspection, Spaatz relayed to Arnold that the XXI Bomber Command was "the best and most technically and tactically proficient military organization that the world has seen to date."⁴⁸ In an August 1945 telegram, Arnold agreed. He told LeMay, "The part you played in developing and commanding the XXI Bomber Command represents one of the outstanding personal achievements of this war. You and the men under your command have indeed made clear to the

⁴⁵ Coffey, *Iron Eagle*, 178.

⁴⁶ Major General (Ret) Haywood S. Hansell to Major James M. Boyle, 4 January 1968, Box 140, Folder 11. MacKinlay Kantor Papers, 1885-1977, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Hereafter cited as "Kantor Papers."

⁴⁷ Lieutenant General James V. Edmundson, interview by Dr. Edgar F. Puryear, Jr., 9 July 1978, transcript, page 42, K239.0512-1411, US Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, AL.

⁴⁸ Coffey, *Iron Eagle*, 387.

world the full meaning of strategic bombardment. Your imagination, resourcefulness, and initiative have reflected credit on the entire Army Air Forces. We are intensely proud of what you have done.”⁴⁹

LeMay departed the Pacific theater with an unrivaled reputation for success. That legacy of success, a persistent hallmark of LeMay’s career, reached a new depth in 1945. More than just a successful operator, or successful leader of men, LeMay was now a successful strategist. With the lives of hundreds of thousands of Americans on the line, the pressure of a nation on his back, LeMay figured out how to cripple Japan. He had grown into a prominent member of the military bureaucracy, wise in the ways of inter-service rivalry and international relations.

His formative journey was complete. The lessons of his life up to this point shaped every decision he made in the future. Where earlier experiences had legitimized Curtis LeMay, now he had *become* Curtis LeMay. From Berlin, to London, to Washington, to Guam, to Tokyo, everyone knew the name Curt LeMay, a name that soon carried great weight in Moscow as well—much to the chagrin of Soviet leaders.

⁴⁹ Telegram from General Arnold to LeMay, 15 August 1945, Box 140, Folder 9, Kantor Papers.

Conclusion

Themes and Legacies

Both as a senior leader and after his retirement, LeMay steadfastly maintained there was no secret to his rapid rise to high command in the Air Force. He repeatedly attributed his advance to hard work.¹ That he did, although in his formative years other factors also coalesced to promote his development into a successful strategic leader.

One way to explain LeMay's formative experiences is a simple chronology of important events and characteristics. Such a description includes how the circumstances of his childhood and teenage years engendered a character particularly suited to military service and aviation, notes that strong work ethic and a dream of flight fueled LeMay's successes through college, and highlights that excellence in his primary duties set him apart as a B-17 crewmember. While such an approach may only scratch the surface of LeMay's formative story, it provides the necessary foundation for a deeper and broader analysis.

To reach such an analysis, three themes surface that together provide an effective lens through which to view LeMay's formative narrative. The first describes LeMay as an integrative thinker. It centers on his uncanny knack to deliver successful solutions to challenging problems under difficult circumstances. The more pressure-packed or important the mission, the better LeMay performed. The second theme revisits the manner in which LeMay's mentors leveraged his personal successes into institutional airpower victories, resulting in increased notoriety and opportunities. The view through this lens illustrates that LeMay's rapid rise depended on sponsorship from his superiors. Finally,

¹ General Curtis E. LeMay, *Talon: the Cadet Magazine of the USAF Academy*, 1 Feb 65, page 5, Box 141, Folder 6, MacKinlay Kantor Papers, 1885-1977, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Hereafter cited as "Kantor Papers."

the third theme dissects several of LeMay's legacies, illustrating how his formative experiences influenced his decisions as commander of SAC.

LeMay as an Integrative Thinker

In his book *The Opposable Mind: Winning through Integrative Thinking*, Roger Martin describes a characteristic common to successful leaders. Martin claims they have the “predisposition and capacity to hold two diametrically opposing ideas in their heads. And, then, without panicking or simply settling for one alternative or the other, they’re able to produce a synthesis that is superior to either opposing idea.”² Throughout his life, LeMay displayed this type of cognitive agility. When speaking introspectively about his decisions in these difficult situations LeMay claimed he was simply “taking the bull by the horns.” However, that characterization downplays his brilliant problem solving capacity. Many of the incidents that define LeMay's life—his greatest successes—resulted from integrative thinking.

LeMay's most prominent early leadership decision was a display of integrative thinking at its finest. Chapter 3 described the daunting dilemma facing LeMay's 305th Bomb Group when it arrived in Europe in October 1942. The copious German flak was exacting a heavy toll on B-17 operations. Colonel Frank Armstrong, a combat veteran of Eighth Bomber Command, told LeMay and his green crews that aggressive maneuvering was their only chance to survive the flak. LeMay empathized with Armstrong's well-founded warning, but he also recognized performing evasive maneuvers during bomb runs significantly degraded the B-17's bombing accuracy.

It seemed LeMay had two equally unattractive options. On the one hand, to maximize survivability, he could order his crews to maneuver aggressively against the flak, and accept severely degraded bombing effectiveness. On the other hand, he could limit maneuvers in the hope

² Roger L. Martin, *The Opposable Mind: How Successful Leaders Win through Integrative Thinking* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2007), 6.

of increasing target damage. Of course, this option made the B-17s sitting ducks for German flak gunners and risked prohibitive losses. Prior to LeMay's arrival, conventional wisdom in theater dictated the first option: accept the diminished accuracy and bring home as many B-17s as possible from each mission.

LeMay challenged conventional wisdom and reevaluated the problem. Calling on his limited experience with Army artillery, he did his own analysis of German defenses. Based on the rate of fire and accuracy of the German guns, LeMay concluded they could not be as lethal as Armstrong and other B-17 veterans claimed. The 305th's first combat mission featured a seven-minute non-maneuvering bomb run. LeMay's bombers struck targets at St. Nazaire with unprecedented accuracy with no losses to German flak. In the wake of this paradigm-shattering success, the rest of Eighth Bomber Command quickly adopted LeMay's tactic.

Successes in Europe propelled LeMay to the helm of B-29 operations in the Pacific. As detailed in Chapter 4, upon taking command of XXI Bomber Command, LeMay faced a problem that had confounded his predecessors. Designed as a high-altitude, high-speed bomber, when flying above 25,000 feet the B-29 was virtually immune to Japanese ground-based defenses and fighter aircraft. However, strong jet stream winds above Japan made bombing from such high altitudes extremely inaccurate and difficult. Once again, LeMay faced two frustrating choices: bomb with poor accuracy from high altitude or bomb from lower altitudes and risk losses from Japanese air defenses.

Once again, LeMay's integrative thinking carried the day. Ignoring standard practices, he ordered the B-29s to bomb from altitudes as low as 5,000 feet. To maximize bomb damage, he replaced the B-29s' high explosive payloads with incendiary bombs and directed night attacks to mitigate Japanese defenses. The incredible damage and low B-29 losses

from the 9 March 1945 fire-bombing missions proved the merit of LeMay's innovative solution.

In each of these cases, LeMay's actions displayed remarkable personal confidence and vision. His self-reliant nature, fostered during childhood, encouraged him to search out unique solutions to these difficult problems. However, external factors also facilitated LeMay's bold decisions. To understand how, we must examine the second theme of LeMay's formative life—his critical personal relationships.

LeMay's Positive Feedback Cycle

LeMay's early military successes bolstered his self-confidence. More importantly, they gave confidence to his superiors. With each success, their confidence in LeMay increased. The sponsorship and trust of his leaders carried with it a degree of top cover. By giving him space, LeMay's superiors engendered his innovation. The successes brought accolades for both LeMay and his superior officers. Hence, as LeMay climbed the ladder of military success, he enjoyed a level of support, trust, and autonomy not afforded to his peer commanders.

This cycle began when LeMay met Robert Olds. As explained in Chapter 2, Olds was LeMay's first military mentor, and arguably his first male role model as well. Notably, however, Olds's sponsorship of LeMay ultimately proved more important than his mentorship. LeMay won Olds's trust by consistently proving his merit as a B-17 navigator. Olds chose LeMay for every important mission, including long distance B-17 flights to South America and the *Rex* intercept in the Atlantic. In each case, LeMay delivered success; and each success benefited both LeMay and Olds.

For his part, Olds ensured his young protégé received an appropriate share of the credit. In a defining example of sponsorship, Olds pointed out to Ira Eaker that LeMay was the best navigator in the Air Corps. Olds continued to monitor and mentor LeMay as the latter moved to positions of increasing responsibility during pre-war expansion.

LeMay's arrival in the European theater coincided with a shift in his formative personal relationships. Olds was now in charge of building and training new B-17 groups in the United States. LeMay leveraged his influence with Olds to get better-trained replacements into theater. However, LeMay's relationship with Eaker, commander of Eighth Bomber Command, now held prominence. Because of Olds's earlier sponsorship, Eaker already knew LeMay was a successful aviator. By early 1943, LeMay's contributions to the bombing effort benefitted the entire theater. Eaker himself, under pressure to produce results from the bombing campaign, was a major beneficiary. In response, Eaker assumed the role of LeMay's advocate, passing praise to General Arnold, commanding general of Army Air Forces. Evidence suggests that Eaker's endorsement was a major factor in Arnold's decision to select LeMay to command B-29 operations in the CBI theater in 1944.

In the Pacific theater, Arnold granted LeMay the freedom to employ the B-29s as he best saw fit. Arnold's top cover and delegated autonomy allowed LeMay to envision and enact the tactics underpinning the debilitating firebombing campaign—the solution to a complex problem. This new relationship with Arnold continued the cycle that started years earlier with Olds.

Olds and LeMay both benefited from their pre-war relationship, and Olds's sponsorship made Eaker aware of LeMay's accomplishments. In 1942, the relationship of importance became that between Eaker and LeMay. Again, each profited from the affiliation, and Eaker ensured Arnold learned of LeMay's potential. Lacking these relationships, LeMay might never have attained the positions necessary to influence bomber operations in World War II; nor would he have left such a lasting legacy on SAC and the US Air Force.

Dissecting LeMay's Legacies

LeMay's formative experiences culminated with his command of B-29 operations in the Pacific Theater. His iconic status, however, resulted

from his stewardship of SAC. SAC, initially commanded by General George C. Kenney, formed in March 1946.³ During the command's first two years, it struggled along with the rest of the Air Force as post war military budgets diminished. Compounding its fiscal problems, SAC had a poor safety record and undertrained aircrews. In the spring of 1948, Air Force chief of staff General Hoyt S. Vandenberg asked aviation legend Charles Lindbergh to evaluate SAC's flying operations. Lindbergh's damning report condemned Kenney and Vandenberg wasted little time in naming a replacement. LeMay took command of SAC on 21 September 1948.⁴ For the third time in his career, following his successes in the European and Pacific theaters, the Air Force charged LeMay with turning around a floundering bomber organization.⁵

During his nine-year stewardship of SAC, LeMay built an organization whose culture largely represented his views. In "The SAC Mentality: the Origins of Organizational Culture in Strategic Air Command, 1946-1962," Melvin Deaile identified the key aspects of a nascent SAC's culture. According to Deaile, SAC leaders—specifically LeMay—actively cultivated these characteristics to optimize their organization's capability to counter and deter the emerging Soviet threat.⁶

The "SAC way" included a common mindset that the command was "at war today."⁷ That mindset necessitated a diligent focus on effective and realistic training. Additionally, LeMay reasoned that given the stressful nature of SAC's mission, airmen and their families should have

³ Walton S. Moody, *Building a Strategic Air Force* (Washington, D.C.: Air Force History and Museums Program, 1996), 63.

⁴ Moody, *Building a Strategic Air Force*, 226-229.

⁵ Melvin G. Deaile, "The SAC Mentality: The Origins of Organizational Culture in Strategic Air Command, 1946-1962" (Ph.D. Diss., University of North Carolina, 2007), 115.

⁶ Deaile, "The SAC Mentality," 119-120.

⁷ Thomas M. Coffey, *Iron Eagle: The Turbulent Life of General Curtis LeMay*, 1st ed. (New York: Crown Publishers, 1986), 281.

good recreation facilities and housing. While each of these three characteristics fit into a culture that supported SAC's mission, they were also in harmony with the SAC leader's formative life; it is not surprising LeMay embraced them.

LeMay's decision to put SAC on a wartime footing has its origin in the influence of Robert Olds. When LeMay was still a lieutenant, he reported to Langley Field, Virginia to learn to fly the B-17. He quickly found himself serving as Olds's operations officer. According to LeMay's memoir, Olds made him understand for the first time that the purpose of the Air Corps was to be ready to fight and win a war.⁸ That simple axiom stuck with LeMay and became one of his guiding principles.

In 1942, LeMay took the newly formed and poorly equipped 305th Bomb Group to Spokane, Washington, to counter the threat of Japanese coastal invasion. Despite having never trained for it, his mission was to "bomb the enemy fleet if it approached."⁹ Rather than dwelling on his unit's shortcomings, LeMay embraced Olds's maxim and got as ready as possible to defeat the Japanese fleet.¹⁰

As LeMay joined the war in Europe, his focus on the mission intensified. As discussed in Chapter 3, LeMay developed several innovative tactics and procedures to boost B-17 bombing effectiveness. LeMay's unyielding drive to increase the bomb damage to the designated target underpinned each of these prescriptions. The 305th Bomb Group's stellar results compelled the other units in theater to adopt their practices. Little more than two years later, LeMay's decision to send B-29s on low-altitude attacks against the Japanese mainland followed the

⁸ Curtis E. LeMay and MacKinlay Kantor, *Mission with LeMay: My Story*, 1st ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965), 131.

⁹ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 215.

¹⁰ L. Douglas Keeney, *15 Minutes: General Curtis LeMay and the Countdown to Nuclear Annihilation*, 1st ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2011), 49. Keeney directly associates the 305th Bomb Group's posture in Spokane with Olds's influence on LeMay.

same rationale. LeMay was singularly concerned with optimizing target destruction.

LeMay's wartime experience validated Olds's opinion of the purpose of the Air Corps. LeMay also remembered how the Air Corps struggled to prepare during the run up to war. He recalled, "We went to war with nothing, with no training, and had to start from scratch."¹¹ LeMay was determined to avoid that mistake with SAC and put the entire organization into the same frame of mind: "We are at war now."¹²

LeMay recognized the only way to ensure SAC's war readiness was to demand realistic training. His military career featured a number of formative experiences that highlighted the importance of sound and appropriate training. LeMay had seen poor training in action. His first instructor pilot was a poor teacher who nearly cost LeMay his dream of being a flyer. In 1934, LeMay watched Air Corps pilots struggle to deliver the mail because they lacked the proper equipment and training to fly in instrument weather conditions.¹³ The shortfalls cost many pilots their lives.

Contrasting these incidents, LeMay's experience from his own commands engendered positive lessons of the importance of training. As discussed in Chapter 3, LeMay trained his first bomb group nearly to the breaking point before they left for Europe. His relentless training regimen earned him the nickname "Iron Ass" from his subordinates. Once in theater, LeMay designated "lead crews" that trained even more than their peers. Upon his arrival in the Pacific theater, LeMay trained the B-29 units just as hard. He stood down combat operations for weeks

¹¹ Richard H. Kohn and Joseph P. Harahan, *Strategic Air Warfare: An Interview with Generals Curtis E. LeMay, Leon W. Johnson, David A. Burchinal, and Jack J. Catton*, Office of US Air Force History (Washington D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1988), 84.

¹² LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 436.

¹³ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 108.

at a time to improve fundamental flying skills.¹⁴ In each instance, improved operational success followed these periods of focused training.

One of LeMay's first actions at SAC was to start a Lead Crew School, adapted from the model he used in both World War II theaters. The school emphasized standardized procedures, radar bombing techniques, and crew discipline. SAC put 36 of its top crews through the school in the summer of 1949. After graduating from the Lead Crew School, the crews returned to their respective wings to train their fellow aviators.¹⁵

Realistic training initiatives, such as the Lead Crew School, rapidly increased SAC's combat capability. Soon after taking command, LeMay ordered the infamous Dayton Mission to test SAC's readiness. On short notice, LeMay charged SAC aircraft to mount a simulated attack against Wright Field. He directed they use radar aiming and employ from realistic high altitudes. The results exposed a lack of readiness and ability—not a single bomber successfully completed the relatively simple mission.¹⁶

Less than two years later SAC staged another large practice mission, codenamed BECALM. The exercise featured the coordinated actions of more than 300 bombers, tankers, and reconnaissance planes. The results were a testament to LeMay's training initiatives. Fifty-eight of the 60 bombers tasked to simulate atomic weapons successfully struck their targets.¹⁷ SAC had proven it was now ready for war.

LeMay's desire to take care of his people was the lone divergence from his focus on the wartime mission and its associated training requirements. When LeMay took command, SAC's military housing was

¹⁴ General Paul K. Carlton, interview by Major Scottie S. Thompson, 13-15 August 1979, transcript, page 48, K239.0512-1138, US Air Force Historical Research Agency, Maxwell AFB, AL.

¹⁵ Deaile, "The SAC Mentality," 139-40.

¹⁶ Coffee, *Iron Eagle*, 278.

¹⁷ Keeney, *15 Minutes*, 68.

in a state of disrepair, with some family accommodations little better than “chicken coops.”¹⁸ The food in SAC’s mess halls during the early days was equally terrible. LeMay succinctly summed up the dining facilities: “They stunk.”¹⁹ The fact that LeMay prioritized fixing the mess facilities and providing quality housing in SAC is not surprising, given his formative experiences.

LeMay first realized the importance of a quality mess as an aviation cadet. At LeMay’s initial training base, March Field, California, the food lacked both quality and good presentation. When LeMay transferred to Kelly Field, Texas for advanced training, he found the mess facilities outstanding. The glaring morale difference between the two bases made a lasting impression on the young pilot.²⁰

LeMay served as mess officer during later assignments at Selfridge Field, Michigan, and Wheeler Field, Hawaii. Additionally, mess officer responsibilities constituted a major portion of LeMay’s duties as deputy commander of a Civilian Conservation Corps camp during the summer of 1933. LeMay was just a second lieutenant, and while he learned a lot about food service, his rank limited his impact. However, some 15 years later, with stars on his shoulders, he made sweeping changes. At some SAC bases, LeMay arranged for his cooks and staffers to work with the best local hotels and restaurants. The cooks learned how to prepare and present great food and the commercial establishments got free labor in return.²¹ In short order, LeMay transformed SAC’s mess facilities and clubs into first-class establishments. SAC’s housing troubles, on the other hand, proved more difficult to solve.

LeMay was no stranger to the stress caused by substandard housing. He lived in five different homes during his childhood—none of

¹⁸ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 468-70.

¹⁹ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 437.

²⁰ LeMay and Kantor, *Mission with LeMay*, 54, 74.

²¹ Undated interview of Curtis LeMay by MacKinlay Kantor, transcript, page 12, Box 147, Folder 17, Kantor Papers.

them particularly comfortable considering the size of his family. Later in life, when he and his wife arrived at Wheeler Field, they found extremely limited family housing options. They finally settled on a small cottage on the beach; it lacked hot water and the shower drained directly onto the ground through slats in the floor.²²

In response to the housing problem, LeMay devised a plan to construct prefabricated homes on undeveloped parcels of base land. LeMay wanted to use loans from commercial banks to pay for the houses, and then repay the loans with prospective tenants' housing allowances. Air Force financial regulations prohibited giving housing allowances to members living on base, a policy that ultimately prevented LeMay from implementing his plan. However, congressional action soon allocated federal funds for new family housing at SAC bases. LeMay shifted his focus to housing for his single enlisted men and ordered construction of new barracks that featured two-man private rooms.²³

Shortly after taking command, LeMay made significant changes to elements of SAC's organizational culture. First, he placed the command in a wartime mindset. Next, he focused on the realistic training necessitated by that mindset. Finally, he took positive action to ensure his hard working people had adequate housing and quality mess facilities. These three decisions led to organizational characteristics that became hallmarks of SAC. LeMay's formative experiences eloquently explain the rationale behind each of them.

Those same formative experiences, however, also suggest why SAC command, rather than his subsequent term as chief of staff of the Air Force, marked LeMay's greatest professional success. From 1942 through 1957, LeMay's exceptional operational leadership delivered a string of nearly uninterrupted triumphs. This left him either unable or

²² Warren Kozak, *LeMay: The Life and Wars of General Curtis LeMay* (Washington, D.C.: Regenery Pub., 2009), 44.

²³ Moody, *Building a Strategic Air Force*, 260-65.

unwilling to adapt his methods and worldview when the circumstances of his service as Chief of Staff suggested he should have. At that point in his life, Curt LeMay was already Curt LeMay—his development had halted.

A conversation between LeMay and General Arnold illustrated the former's solidifying mindset. On 15 June 1945, LeMay predicted Japan's surrender by the end of September. LeMay based the prediction on operational factors, pitting the number of remaining targets against the number of sorties required to destroy them. Notably, LeMay failed to consider Japan's decision calculus. In LeMay's mind, the destruction of military targets rather than the strategic decisions of Japan's political leaders determined the war's end. While his formative moments prepared him well to solve practical problems and made him ideally suited to operational command, they served him less well in the face of broader strategic challenges. LeMay's disregard for the political dimension of warfare in this instance foreshadowed a deficiency that resurfaced during his duty as chief of staff of the Air Force.

LeMay's strained interaction with the Kennedy administration during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis highlights his failure in the realm of grand strategy. As internal national security memoranda reveal, Kennedy expected his service chiefs to provide military advice in the context of the larger political and geostrategic environment. LeMay's initial counsel to Kennedy, which advocated swift military intervention against Cuba, lacked such consideration. While LeMay focused on militarily eliminating the communist foothold in Cuba, Kennedy recognized the situation as one of several significant and interrelated struggles in an ongoing Cold War.²⁴ LeMay's myopic emphasis on operational rather than political outcomes effectively eliminated him from

²⁴ Matthew R. Brooks, "Bull in a China Shop? General Curtis E. LeMay's Advice to the President During the Cuban Missile Crisis," (Maxwell AFB, AL: School of Advanced Air and Space Studies, 2009), 41-43, 53.

Kennedy's inner circle of decision makers for the remainder of the crisis. LeMay had encountered a bull too large to "take by the horns."

Why Curt LeMay?

No biographer or historian can definitively explain why LeMay rose above his peers to become the most influential and controversial leader in the Air Force's history. At each stage of his career, LeMay displayed an uncanny knack to earn a leadership position and then successfully adapt, innovate, and excel to produce positive results. However, to understand that "uncanny knack," one must disaggregate the formative dynamics of LeMay's life.

Forged in his youth and validated by his early military experiences, LeMay's character placed a premium on competence and work ethic. An integrative thinker, LeMay fashioned superior solutions to complex problems. A positive feedback cycle surrounded his career, simultaneously increasing his ability to succeed and broadening the impact of each successful endeavor. An incredibly driven man with an aptitude for abstract problem solving and risk taking, surrounded by an influential, unique, and resilient support system—this is how Curt LeMay became Curt LeMay.

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